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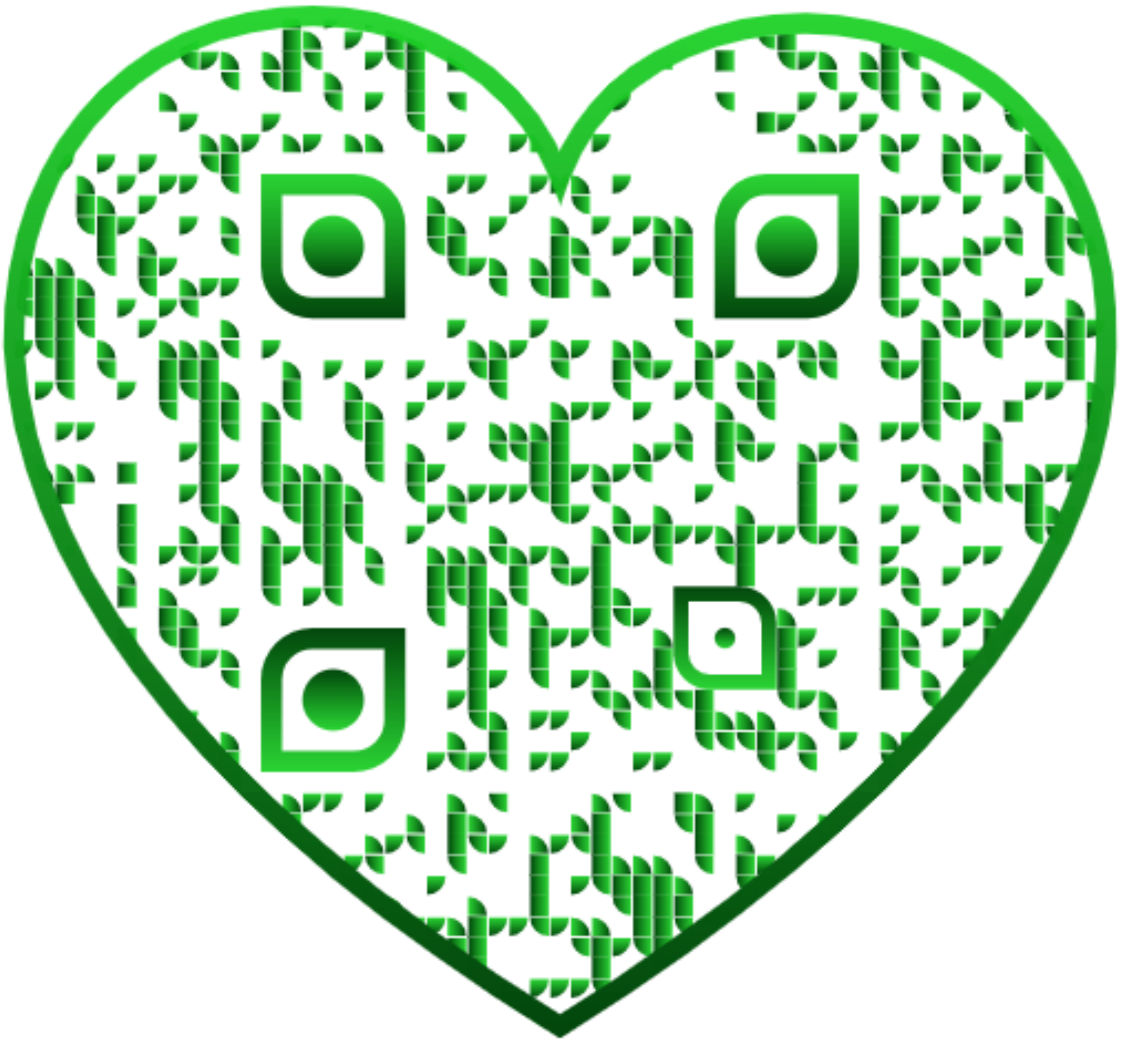
MUSIC'S NEXT GEN

A.R. Rahman with the 24 young musicians he is mentoring for the second season of NEXA Music, the nationwide talent discovery platform in partnership with Qyuki Digital Media



Contents

ISSUE 183
'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

38
Music's Next Generation

A.R. Rahman has mentored 24 young artists for the second season of the nationwide talent hunt and discovery platform NEXA Music in partnership with Qyuki Digital Media

By David Britto and Nirmika Singh

30
Blues Legend Buddy Guy: 'I Don't Want to Be the Best in Town, I Just Want to Be the Best Until the Best Come Around'

The American blues musician performed at the Mahindra Blues Festival in Mumbai last month as part of his ongoing Damn Right Farewell Tour

By David Britto

Contents

The Mix

10 **How A Trip to Sri Lanka Led Mumbai Pianist Anurag Naidu to Work on the New Collaborative Neo-Soul-Jazz Album 'Odyssey'**
The musician teamed up with Spanish vocalist Alba Santos, Cuban bassist Aniel Someillan and Brazilian drummer Isais Alves on the eight-track record

11 **Abhibyanjana Rubhi Thatal Offers Sonic Bliss on Debut EP 'Breezing Through'**
The Gangtok-bred artist's impeccable vocals shine across three-tracks

20 **Punjabi Pop Artist Burrah on 'Udja' for Coke Studio Bharat, Grammy Dreams and More**
In addition to working with the likes of OAFF and Savera, New Delhi's Jasdeep Singh has also been a collaborator with producers such as Gurbax, Hashbass and Dropped Out

22 **Yungsta Digs Deeper Than Ever Before on 'Ruhbaru' with Sez On The Beat**
The New Delhi hip-hop artist has dropped the first song off his upcoming full-length album 'Meen'

ON THE COVER

Photograph by **Gaurav Sawn**
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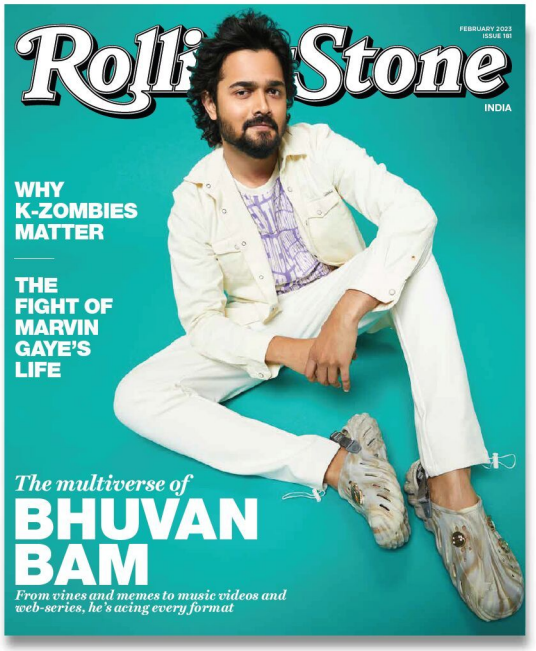
+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE



"Uncovering the man behind the art and learning about him as a person was a great take away."

— Shilpa Reddy

Bhuvan Bam's Multiverse

It was quite fascinating to read about Bhuvan Bam in this in-depth interview. Uncovering the man behind the art and learning about him as a person was a great take away. Learning about his journey, the multiple projects he's involved in and his low moments made for a captivating and invigorating read.

SPOTLIGHT

Lollapalooza Extravaganza

The first Asian edition of the iconic music festival Lollapalooza which took place in Mumbai earlier this year went off without a hitch and that was great to read. This just shows that India has arrived on the global stage and is capable of hosting large-scale events and festivals. Hopefully, the trend will continue and more international artists and festivals keep coming to India.

— Gautam Sharma

Manas Jha's Freedom

Hearing Mumbai singer-songwriter Manas Jha's new record 'Freedom or Love' brought back a sense of nostalgia with its steely rock sound. It was wonderful to hear the likes of artists such as guitarist Warren Mendonsa, drummer Jai Row Kavi, multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Sidd Coutto and guitar maverick Dhruv Visvanath spread across the record.

— Sinead Aguiar

NIMBU Juice

I'm always on the lookout for fresh new music and artists. I was very happy to stumble upon NIMBU and her song "Eleventh Hour." The neo-soul, hip-hop and disco-house vibe of the track made me an instant fan and I can't wait to hear what she's got coming up next.

— Tripti Duggal

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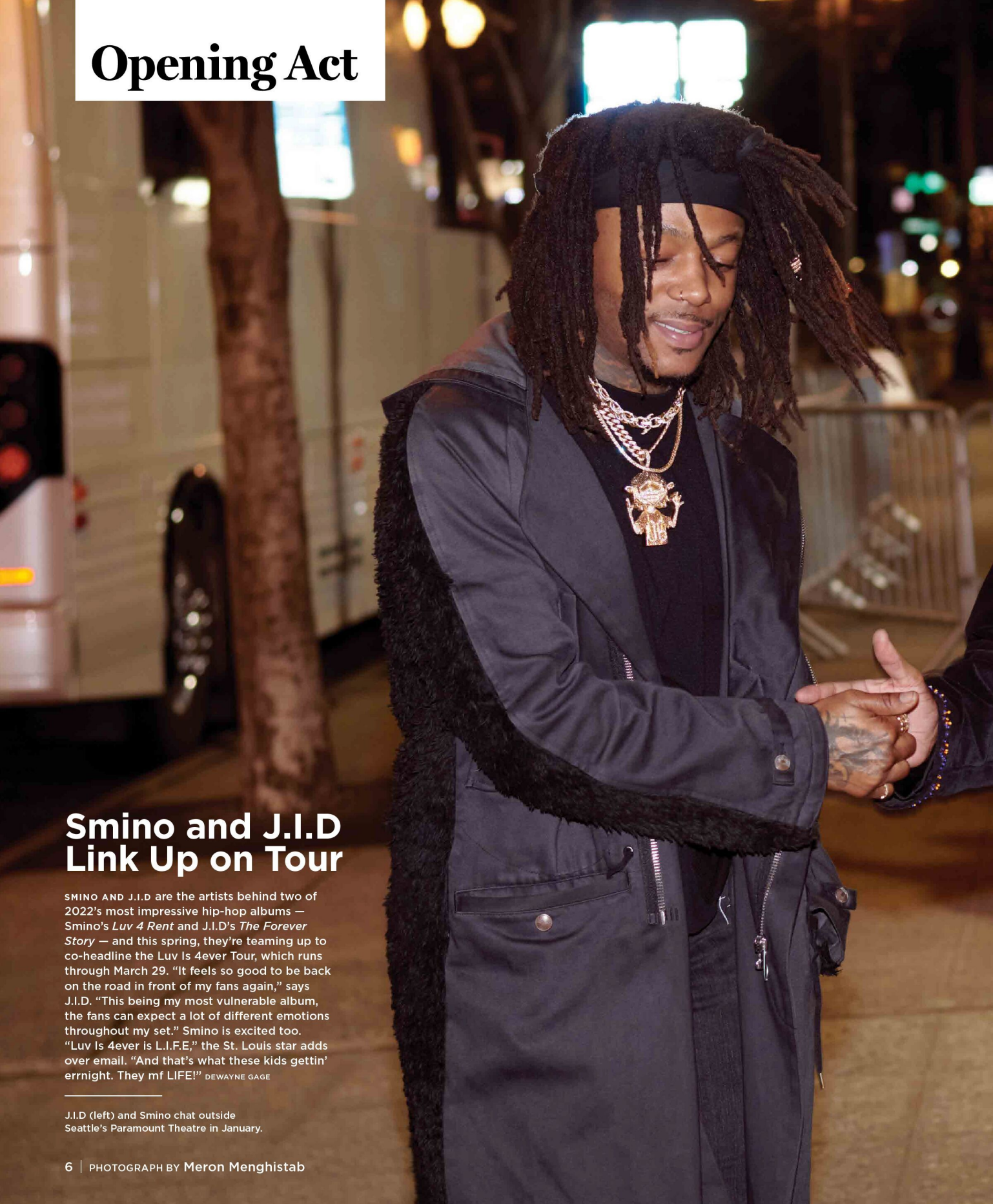
Opening Act



Smino and J.I.D Link Up on Tour

SMINO AND J.I.D are the artists behind two of 2022's most impressive hip-hop albums — Smino's *Luv 4 Rent* and J.I.D's *The Forever Story* — and this spring, they're teaming up to co-headline the Luv Is 4ever Tour, which runs through March 29. "It feels so good to be back on the road in front of my fans again," says J.I.D. "This being my most vulnerable album, the fans can expect a lot of different emotions throughout my set." Smino is excited too. "Luv Is 4ever is L.I.F.E," the St. Louis star adds over email. "And that's what these kids gettin' errnight. They mf LIFE!" DEWAYNE GAGE

J.I.D (left) and Smino chat outside Seattle's Paramount Theatre in January.

The Mix

Gen Z's Melancholy Maven

Gracie Abrams on her excellent debut, opening for Taylor, and how she feels about the nepo-baby discourse

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Magdalena Wosinska

➔ GRACIE ABRAMS

When the pandemic shut down the world in March 2020, millions of people had to find ways to cope with an abundance of time indoors. Some baked bread. Others took up pottery. And on one very-early Friday morning, singer-songwriter Gracie Abrams got high, dove deep into Taylor Swift's discography, and fired off a tweet: "i know places by taylor swift makes me feel like i'm being hunted down in the purge."

"That was one of like a dozen tweets explaining my feelings about her music in that state," Abrams says, laughing, as I bring it up. (Other tweets sent in the spree suggest Abrams thinks Swift's best song is "Innocent," and "Mine" makes her crave overalls.)

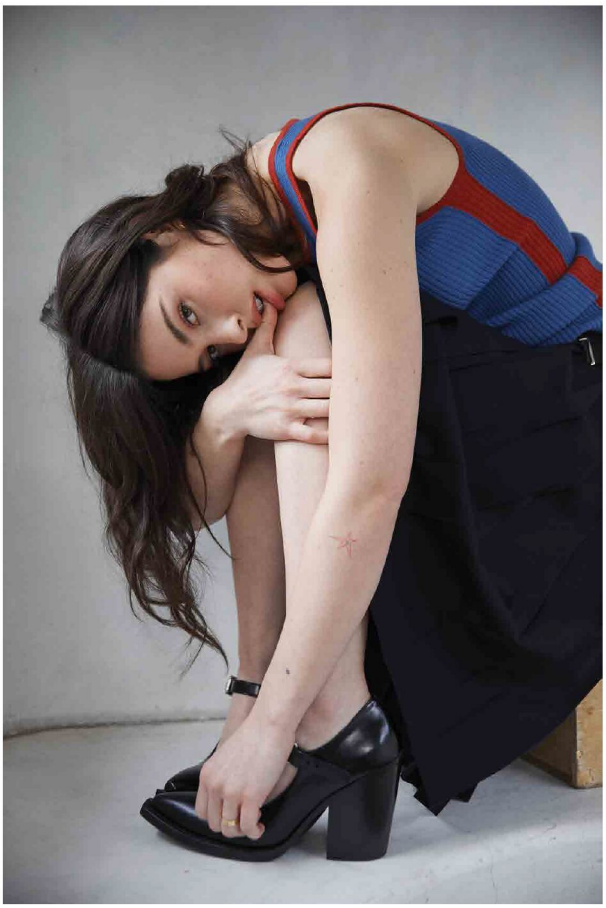
Abrams, 23, will have dozens of chances this summer to see an artist who shaped her — but not as a fan. For 30 dates on Swift's the Eras Tour, Abrams will open for her hero at stadiums across the country. "It feels like the most ridiculous master class known to man," Abrams says. "I'm going to learn so much keeping my head down and listening and watching her do what she was put here to do."

Abrams is Gen Z's melancholy maven and one of pop's buzziest young artists at the moment. Her debut, *Good Riddance*, shows serious command of autobiographical songwriting. She's not the only pop star writing heartbreak confessionals in her bedroom, but she translates the guilt and doubt of young love turned sour in her music better than most of her peers. "I miss you, I'm sorry," a breakout hit that has garnered more than 100 million streams on Spotify, is both a goodbye to a lover and an argument for the opposite: "You said, 'Forever,' in the end I fought it/Please be honest/Are we better for it?"

"Gracie's writing mixes fragility with introspection in a way that I really relate to," Swift tells Rolling Stone. "It makes me feel like maybe she and I started writing songs for the same reason, just to try to make sense of how we feel. My favorite writers are the ones where I never have to wonder why they wrote this particular song, because it just feels inherently obvious that they had to — like a confession or a catharsis. Sometimes it feels like she's on the edge of tears or laughter while she sings, and we're all just sitting on the floor in a circle listening to the story unfold."

On a warm, overcast day in January, Abrams and I sit in a beige booth at a Hollywood diner she frequents, hours away from the release of a new single, "Where do we go now?" Abrams grew up in L.A.; to her it's "an industry city," one her family is very much a part of: Her father is the filmmaker J.J. Abrams and her mother, Katie McGrath, is a producer and co-CEO of J.J.'s production company.

Abrams began writing songs when she was eight, just as she started taking journaling seriously. Writing was comforting to her.



Performing in front of people was not. "I was not like a little kid that would listen to music on the radio and pretend to be onstage," Abrams says. "I never wanted to be onstage."

Her first act came together in 2019, when she took a break from classes at New York's Barnard College to focus on music. She signed with Interscope, and that fall released "Mean It," with its soft vocals, infectious chorus, and vulnerable storytelling a sign of things to come.

Good Riddance took shape after the National's Aaron Dessner invited Abrams to his Long Pond Studio in New York's Hudson Valley. When Abrams started crafting the album, she was fresh out of a breakup, and the feelings on *Good Riddance* are raw. Album opener "Best" was the hardest to write. The lyrics sugarcoat nothing, stinging deeper with each verse as Abrams admits she wasn't at her best in a past romance. "We were too different/You were so sensitive/Gave me the best of that/I was so negligent," she sings. The same song gave the album its title: "You were there all the time/You're the worst of my crimes/You fell hard/I thought good riddance."

I ask Abrams how the subject of her songs will feel about them. She takes a beat to think about it, acknowledging that there were many times she thought she might have to spike a song because of the subject matter. "I'd write a song and then I'd get really insecure about anyone else knowing that I wrote it," she says. "It's concerning to think about hurting a person because of something you've written."

Dessner encouraged her to move forward with the songs, following the example of another artist who recorded at Long Pond. "Aaron said, 'You know, all the artists you've ever loved before, they've all been like, 'Holy shit, can I release this?'" Abrams says. "Honestly, I sat and internally just thought about Taylor, and she's had the most public career ever, and still has the guts to say what she means...."

At Long Pond, Abrams stayed with Dessner, his wife, and their three children. Abrams often worked 12-hour days, taking breaks by spending time with the Dessner children. "His kids made me want to maybe be a mom one day, after never wanting that, to be honest," Abrams says, smiling. (She particularly enjoyed nature walks with the middle child, Robin, who's obsessed with lizards.)

Abrams hasn't missed the online discourse regarding nepotism — a conversation that came to a head in *New York* magazine's December 2022 "nepo baby" cover. (The issue classified Abrams as an "on the come-up" nepo baby.) Abrams says she doesn't find the term insulting, and stressed that she understood the conversation: "I know how hard I work, and I know how separate I've kept [my parents] from every conversation about anything careerwise, but of course you can understand what it looks like from the outside."

When Abrams got the call that she was going to open for Swift, she phoned her mom, who told her daughter that she sounded like she was shaking. Then Abrams texted Swift, whom she'd met through Dessner a few years earlier. "I was just like, 'I don't even have words for you, but I will be thanking you for the rest of my entire life.'"

At the diner, Abrams orders nothing, instead fidgeting with her Cartier love ring as we talk. She's feeling nerves — the kind that bubble up when your single is hours away and your debut album isn't too far off — and coming to grips with the fact that her thoughts and feelings are going to exist in more places than her phone and journal.

"I feel more grateful than I ever have for what songwriting has provided me as a person outside of music," Abrams says. "I grew up using it as a tool to process shit, but, like ... to have done it and to finish something ... I very much felt like I had kind of done the grieving and really let go of what I needed to." WAISS ARAMESH

FAST FACTS

MOM KNOWS BEST
Abrams says no one is a harsher critic than her mom, whose favorite song of hers is "21."

SIMBA SINGALONG
Abrams loved *The Lion King* growing up, and would sing along to Sara Bareilles in the car on the way to school.

JUSTICE FOR 'CLEAN'
Abrams, a Swift and Imogen Heap fan, says "Clean" (penned by the two) might be her favorite song on *1989*.

HAIR BY BOBBY ELLIOT AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY JOSE L. DUARTE AT THE ONLY AGENCY. STYLING BY SPENCER SINGER. THIS PAGE: TOP BY JUDY TURNER. SKIRT VINTAGE COMME DE GARCONS. SHOES BY PRADA. PREVIOUS PAGE: FULL LOOK BY MIU MIU. SHOES BY PRADA.

How A Trip to Sri Lanka Led Mumbai Pianist Anurag Naidu to Work on the New Collaborative Neo-Soul-Jazz Album 'Odyssey'

The musician teamed up with Spanish vocalist Alba Santos, Cuban bassist Aniel Someillan and Brazilian drummer Isais Alves on the eight-track record

In January 2020, Mumbai pianist Anurag Naidu received a text from Spanish singer Alba Santos inviting him to Colombo in Sri Lanka to work on a music project alongside Cuban bassist Aniel Someillan and Brazilian drummer Isais Alves. That project has just been released in the shape of the eight-track album *Odyssey*.

The trio had a residency at a restaurant in a hotel in Colombo and were keen on putting together material for an album that they could tour with and tapped Naidu for his skills on the keys. Despite being excited to be part of the project, Naidu does admit that he was filled with curiosity and anxiety. He says, "I was almost ready to assume that this was a well-thought-out prank. I was crashing with the musicians in the hotel. People I've never met, and having only seen their socials as proof of [them being] real humans and not bots. No Zoom, no Skype."

However, once he did arrive in Colombo, he knew that working on this project would be a breeze after hearing Alves and Someillan play. Naidu says, "90 percent of the work was already done." The pianist adds about Santos, "Alba on the other hand is one of the most gifted singers I have worked with. [She has] incredible range, a melodious husky voice and she really knew how to use it to her advantage."

The now four-piece band began workshopping song ideas as they had only six days to finish the album. They wrote five tracks by the end of their first day together and had three more by the second day. "The whole experience gave me a residency feel; living, eating and chilling with the same musicians. So, you're doing more than just playing music together; [you're] talking about culture, likes, dislikes," says Naidu.

Odyssey on the whole is a beautiful concoction of Brazilian rhythms, jazz, R&B, neo-soul, Cubano, flamenco and funk music. The musicians on show deliver exceptional performances across the eight songs. Santos' nifty and dynamic vocals add plenty of color to the tracks while Alves and Someillan are sublime with their solid grooves that lay the foundation for the songs, and Naidu is at his creative best with his deft touch on the piano, offering melodious moments and lots of dexterity.

Naidu says, "We recorded eight tracks over a period of four days in Sri Lanka at Sound Asia recording studio. It was lovely to have an actual grand piano to play on. All the songs are recorded as one takes, no realigning or jumps. We had insisted upon that as a parameter at the start. It was complicated but also very enriching because you can really hear the synthesis among us and feel that it goes straight through to the end of the track."

A week after returning to Mumbai after the studio sessions, the pandemic hit and Naidu kept in touch with his collaborators throughout and helped with suggestions during the mixing of the album remotely. In 2021, while in Europe, Naidu caught up with Someillan and Santos to tour Spain. It was during this time that the musicians decided to release *Odyssey* in its entirety.

"*Odyssey* was made because creativity needs an outlet; feelings we have as professional musicians that we nourish on the side as we go about our daily jobs. At night the artist comes on. Eventually, all it needs is a catalyst, the spark that creates a fire. And when kindled spirits from different places meet, with the same passion to do something different, you get something different, all in a span of six days," says Naidu. DAVID BRITTO

NARENDRA DANGIYA

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Abhibyanjana Rubhi Thatal Offers Sonic Bliss on Debut EP 'Breezing Through'

The Gangtok-bred artist's impeccable vocals shine across three-tracks

It was in music that singer-songwriter Abhibyanjana Rubhi Thatal found solace while growing up in Gangtok. The artist would sing along to her father's record collection as a kid and soon began learning classical guitar and writing her own songs too. "It was always a personal exercise, but when I moved to Pune for my undergraduate degree, I began sharing more of my music, and since then, I've been taking baby steps in releasing music, one song at a time." Thatal's first release was in 2018 with the bluesy single "Groovy Girl." That was followed up with the ethereal "Winter Love" in 2021 and the soulful "Shampoo Bottle" in 2022.

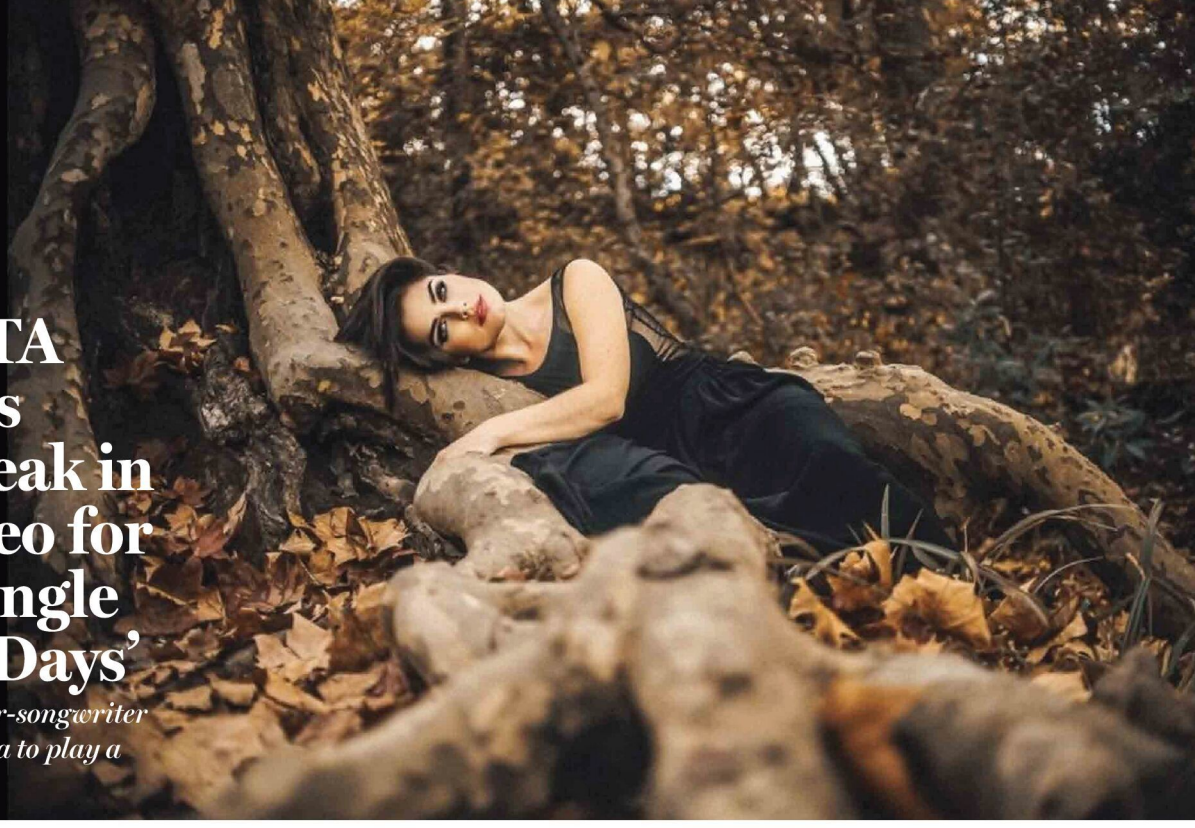
Currently based in Mumbai pursuing a post-graduate degree and music, the artist recently released her three-track debut EP *Breezing Through*.

Work on the record began in 2021 and was initially meant to include five songs. However, Thatal says, "I cut it down to three [as they] were sonically more similar." The singer-songwriter worked with producer Tapanjyoti Phukan and sound engineer Rahul Rabha. To this day, Thatal has never met Phukan in person. She says, "We sent drafts to each other and worked our entire way in this EP through virtual collaboration. I would record demos, and he would send his demos, and it went back and forth."

Breezing Through opens with the elegant title track which Thatal admits to being one of the first songs she ever penned as a teenager. "This song marks a cusp and a yearning for something more in life. Full of romance and optimism, well-suited for a high schooler at that point," she says. The record then moves to the dreamy "Honestly." According to the musician, "The song is like rummaging through scattered thoughts, taking time to pause, and truly laying bare the cavity of fears that I constantly struggle with but find difficult to admit." On the luxuriant EP closer "River," Thatal sings about the landscape of trees and valleys in Gangtok. "Like the river, the song is also about letting something pass by," she says.

Overall, the EP features stellar production with plenty of sonic embellishments across the three songs. Thatal paints a beautiful picture through her lyrics while also delivering a strong and polished vocal performance throughout. The artist says, "The EP is a constant attempt to burst at the seams and being contained at the same time. I'd describe my musical journey that way as well. The three songs in the EP were written at different stages in my life."

There's more new music on the way as well as a music video from Thatal as she readies her next single called "Hues of my Longing" in collaboration with Assam/Mumbai artist Neon Leaf. "I want to keep creating more music and authentic ways to express my experiences. I want to change and experiment with the soundscape that has been created so far in my music and do something different now," says the singer. She's also keen to get on stage and play live shows as well. "This is definitely just the beginning for me," says Thatal. DAVID BRITTO



AMYKITA Channels Heartbreak in New Video for Debut Single 'Golden Days'

The travelling singer-songwriter was recently in India to play a few shows

INDIE POP/FOLK ARTIST AMY NIKITA AKA AMYKITA was born in the U.K. to British parents who settled in France, where she grew up. Brought up in a household that loved music, the artist was heavily influenced by the likes of pop singers such as Britney Spears, Kelly Clarkson and Avril Lavigne. "It was a bit of practice for me," she says.

After going through a rough heartbreak, the musician decided to travel the world 18 months ago. She hopped across 19 countries, mostly in Europe, where she played busking gigs. Passing through Turkey and Jordan, AMYKITA also wound up in India recently to begin the Asia leg of her trip. The singer-songwriter even played shows at beach bars and cafés in Goa during her two-month stay. Recently, she released her melancholic, yet dreamy debut single entitled "*Golden Days*" off her upcoming debut EP. The track is also accompanied with an eye-catching music video, and *Rolling Stone India* caught up with the artist. Read excerpts our interview below.

When did work on your debut EP begin?

I began working on my debut EP in August 2020, when the man I loved the most decided to leave. But I was holding on like I had never held on to anything before and all he could do was repeat that he didn't want to be with me anymore. I couldn't even understand it. It didn't make sense to me. How could our love be destroyed? All of the agony then came out in an artistic form as he was not coming back home. I would wake up in the morning and cry while playing the piano, and then I would have lyrics naturally coming out of my mouth and my fingers would naturally compose things. It was quite magical when I think about it because I didn't have to try. We all know that pain and heartbreak are a big source of inspiration. Well, I definitely experienced it the hard way. I went through hell but I discovered a deep artistic soul in me. That was a beautiful thing.

"The idea of the video clip is, I am walking in a forest holding my heart, with a scar on my chest. It is a metaphor of me trying to continue to give my love to someone who doesn't want it anymore, and all of the heartache and pain."

I wanted the EP to be called *Inconsolable*, because that's how I felt and also because it's a word that can be understood in English and French. But perhaps I'm going to call it *Golden Days* as I feel like it sums up this first part of the breakup, which is losing the *golden days*, the happy days, the love.

There will be five songs on this EP, which have been recorded at the same time. I recorded them all at home and did a premix, and then I paid a sound engineer to polish the entire EP. I really loved working with him. He understood me so well and I think that can be tricky with music because it's about feelings, too. Something invisible lies under the music.

The EP's lead single is out now. What can you tell me about the song and the music video?

Sidiq: When I get a chance to visit India again,
My new song is called '*Golden Days*.' The idea of the video clip is: I am walking in a forest holding my heart, with a scar on my chest. It is a metaphor of me trying to continue to give my love to someone who doesn't want it anymore, and all of the heartache and pain. And then at the chorus you see the golden heart, the heart I had when we were both in love, which I also created myself, painting in gold a real pig's heart bought at the butcher's... And that sounds gross because I'm a vegetarian, but I really did it!

I created a whole system so that black paint came out of the golden heart, covering it in black. I like to work with symbols and metaphors. I guess art is all about that – expressing ideas and feelings through creative images and metaphors.

When will the EP be released in full and what can folks expect from it?

Because I'm doing all the marketing and releasing myself, independently, I don't know when exactly all the songs will be released. I just know that I have four songs left and I want to release them one at a time, ideally with a music video that I will create, too – so it can take time. I really enjoy the whole process, so I try to stay relaxed and tell myself that it's okay if it takes time. Maybe it's my healing time, too. DAVID BRITTO

@FLORIAN_PASCUAL

Actor You Need to Know: Hwang In-youp

He is more than just a handsome face since his portrayals express emotional states, particularly complex feelings, in the most interesting ways

PHOTO COURTESY OF TVN

Modeling served as Hwang In- youp's launchpad into the public eye. His breakthrough in Korean entertainment came in 2018 when he started to land roles with the Naver TV web series *Why*. Insiders describe Hwang as an enthusiastic actor whose recipe for success is his ability to cling to his role and the features of his character with proficiency. That was the catalyst that allowed the gifted Hwang to showcase his artistic flair. And I think that he gives his characters quality and better substance in his own special way. For instance, Hwang played Park Dan-ho in *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019), an escort warrior with exceptional sword skills. How well he captured the character's drive to be an expert swordsman and his love and loyalty for his prince, willing to lay down his life if necessary to keep him safe. So, putting aside the fact that his gorgeous appearance led him to pursue acting, his acting chops characterize his rising acclaim.

The 32-year-old, who goes by the English name Ryan Leon, was born in South Korea but spent his high school and college years in Davao City, Philippines. At the Philippine Nikkei Jin Kai International School, he completed his high-school education, and the Philippine Women's College of Davao awarded him a Bachelor of Fine Arts in fashion design. Bottom line? Before starting his career, Hwang already had the trappings of an artist. Following his initial bit parts, the artist gained acclaim in 2020, appearing as Goo Ja-sung in *18 Again*, a South Korean television series premised on the 2009 film *17 Again* by Jason Filardi, which was presumably influenced by the 1988 comedy film of the same name starring George Burns. We saw Goo as a school bully and the equivalent of Stan, played by Hunter Parrish in the original movie.

Anyone who knows Hwang in any capacity will identify him as Han Seo-jun from the mega-hit romantic comedy-drama series *True Beauty* (2020-2021). Hwang was the second lead alongside the main leads, Cha Eun-woo and Mun Ka-young, but his intense run and slick performance elevated him to superstardom, resulting in the second lead syndrome. His commanding presence and evocative abilities were infused with great moments of subtlety in the drama. It also catapulted him to global recognition. Subsequently, Hwang appeared in the independent short film *Swimming Bird*, which received rave reviews from several quarters. In 2021, Hwang was cast in the fantasy musical series *The Sound of Magic*, sharing screen time with Ji Chang-wook and Choi Sung-eun.

Insiders describe Hwang as an enthusiastic actor whose recipe for success is his ability to cling to his role and the features of his character with proficiency

The artist is steadily advancing his career by sharpening his body of work, and his first lead role in the mystery legal romance drama *Why Her*, which made its premiere last year, is a shining illustration of this. The actor took on the part of a 27-year-old law student who is caring and naive but conceals a troubled past. Hwang is great in the show, as usual. What I appreciate most about him is his smooth screen presence. He is, however, more than just a handsome face. His portrayals can express emotional states, particularly complex feelings, in the most interesting ways. In essence, I truly believe that Hwang In-youp represents a rising superstar. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

Ivan Singh: The Argentinian Bluesman with an Indian Lineage

The musician, who has his roots in Punjab, marked his India debut at last month's Mahindra Blues Festival in Mumbai

AHEAD OF HIS DEBUT GIG IN INDIA AT the Mahindra Blues Festival in Mumbai this weekend, we caught up with U.S.-based Argentinian blues artist Ivan Singh and talked to him about his country winning the 2022 FIFA World Cup, how he got into blues music, his India connect and more. Read below.

Before I get into your music, I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on your country's big achievement this past December.

I wasn't there, but I know how it was. It was a party and was something that Argentina needed so badly. Argentina is nothing but football. It's not been great years. The last 10 years of the country, our economy and politicians... at some point it might be one of the reasons why I looked for a better place. I was just traveling around the world too before I got to Chicago. Things are not getting better [in Argentina] and for one day or two days or something, people can forget about everything. Everyone was hanging out on the street. Five million people got out to celebrate Argentina as world champions and I think of how [Lionel] Messi inspired the people after trying four times in 16 years to get this cup and keep persevering, keep going even when the people say don't play for Argentina. He keeps going. He gets his family straight to the stage. I love [Diego] Maradona too, but I'm happy the Argentinian kind of male idol idea changed too because he's [Messi] inspiring. We all can be Messi in our life, we just need to try to keep going and do the best we can, and don't let things get you down. Just try to become better and work as a team. I think Argentina this time had a good team. There was not only Messi. It was happiness and I think it was a bigger message for the perspective of life. So, I'm super happy Argentina are world champions.

COURTESY OF MAHINDRA BLUES FESTIVAL; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

How did your interest in the blues come about?

It starts with mom. Blues is pretty big in Argentina. In the Nineties when I was born there was a boom of blues in Argentina, not only because [American blues legend] B.B. King was visiting the country two or three times a year, [but also because] Buddy Guy was down there and everyone was visiting Argentina. So, a lot of bluesmen from Argentina singing in Spanish become super popular, even on TV shows. My mom loved Argentinian blues and she also loved [blues legends] Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton, Buddy Guy, and B.B. King. I'm so proud I get the chance to stand next to these masters. My mom, a doctor in Argentina, she was a single mom. She raised me by herself and life was kind of complicated. I think I believe in music as a healing [process] and she was always bringing it home like that — playing some B.B. King, playing some Buddy Guy and we enjoyed it and connected from that side. That's how I fell in love with blues and started playing guitar when I was five. I used to put B.B. King on and try to figure out what he's doing.

What is the current blues scene like back in Argentina?

It was super big in the Nineties. Every 20 or 30 years, in music and fashion things go back. Things are cyclical. It's getting back now, there are still a lot of great artists. There are blues venues, blues jams all over Argentina. I've seen Buddy Guy and Jeff Beck perform in front of thousands of people in Argentina. So, the blues is still there in Argentina and it's a country of future blues players.

Your self-titled debut album was released in 2019 – what can you tell me about that record?

Well, it was just the beginning. It was just a necessity to express what was happening to me in Argentina until that moment. Because I put out this album just two weeks before I left Argentina, because I was traveling, I was like, 'I want to go to see the world and I need to get an album out before.' That's all in Spanish, mostly original songs and this kind of R&B with some blues guitars. I bring some salsa vibe to the blues music I make.

"Three generations before me, my great-grandpa from my mom's side was from Punjab. He left India looking for a better life 130 years ago."

You also have an India connection. What can you tell me about that?

This is so crazy to me and so special. Three generations before me, my great-grandpa from my mom's side was from Punjab. He left India looking for a better life 130 years ago. It was a crazy trip for him to get to Brazil and he walked from Brazil to Argentina for three months. Then he stayed in the north of Argentina, met a Spanish woman and started a family. For all these years I've always had this connection with India and when I decided what my artist name will be, I said, 'Singh,' because I knew I was the last one in my family who will get the name, Singh. But this is crazy. I would never think that I would come here. My first big dream come true, but everything might be written in the stars, you know. No one in my family has come to India. My great-grandfather never found out when his mom died. He always talked about India like he wanted to get back but it was different times, six months in a boat or whatever. He never made it and I'm the first one from my family to come here with this opportunity. My life is blues and guitar and this brings me here. I will never forget this experience. This opportunity to play [and share the lineup] with Buddy Guy, Taj Mahal and Kingfish, if it was happening in Germany or Texas it would not be the same. This is forever a [lifetime's experience] for me, I will never forget it, it's so special for me.

What plans do you have for the rest of the year?

Right now this year is just all about putting music out. We already recorded a live album at the end of last year, now we need to mix it. I'm looking forward to see if I'm going to work with record labels or put it out by myself. This is a big hand Buddy Guy gave me — the chance to show myself to the world, and I hope producers and artists give me a hand to now put my things out. But I definitely want to put out one album this year. It might be two, let's see. DAVID BRITTO

Blues Artist Christone "Kingfish" Ingram on How He Got His Nickname, India Debut and More

The American artist performed at the Mahindra Blues Festival last month in Mumbai

Twenty-four-year-old American blues musician Christone "Kingfish" Ingram is all set to make his India debut this weekend at the Mahindra Blues Festival at Mumbai's Mehboob Studios. Before his performance at the event, we spoke to Ingram about his music, how he received the name "Kingfish," and more. Read below.

I wanted to understand what it was like for you growing up in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

When I was growing up, music was pretty much all around, especially the blues. More of the older guys were alive at the time and I lived right next to a blues band. So, blues was just prevalent at the time. Gospel as well, church [music], all that.

When I interviewed Buddy Guy in 2020, I asked him who the new young blues musicians people should keep an eye out for are and he recommend you. How does it feel to be validated by a legend like him?

Wow, I appreciate that. It's a really beautiful and amazing feeling. Mr. Guy was one of the first bluesmen that I felt I connected with and was very influenced by everything that he did, from how he pushed the blues boundaries to how he does a whole show. So, most definitely it felt like a sigh of relief when he liked what I did.

Your interest in the blues came about through Muddy Waters. Can you tell me about that?

My dad showed me a *PBS* documentary on Muddy Waters and Muddy was the first person I saw when I didn't know how to play, and Buddy was the first person I saw once I knew how to play that style. My favorite Muddy Waters song I would say is 'Long Distance Call.' I love how the slide pierces on this song.

How did you get the nickname 'Kingfish'?

Back home in America there's an old sitcom called *Amos 'n' Andy*, one of the first black sitcoms, and there was a character on there called Kingfish. Well, one of my teachers, who's also a bluesman back home, gave me that name because he said I reminded him of that character.

You've got two albums out, *Kingfish* and *662* – what can you tell me about those records and what they mean to you?

Well, the first record *Kingfish* was kind of like an introduction to myself, to my life, what was going on in my head. I feel like *662* was a deeper introduction. I got more in-depth about my life and what I've been going through at that time and whatnot.

How does it feel to be in India for the first time?

Man, no words can describe it honestly. I never thought I would get to India, especially this early in my career, so I'm just thankful that everybody thought that I was great enough to be here. It's really cool to give some blues to you guys, most definitely. We've mostly toured Europe and the U.K. Honestly, overseas everywhere the blues is more accepted in today's time rather than in the States. Everything's all mainstream music back home, but you guys really do have a love and you guys are very appreciative of it as well.

What can folks expect from your set?

They can expect some of everything. Some of the old blues and new blues. Just a really fiery show for sure.

What plans do you have for the rest of the year?

I just came from L.A. We've been doing different sessions, trying to do some new stuff for a new record. I should have something out at least later this year. DAVID BRITTO

"Muddy Waters was the first person I saw when I didn't know how to play, and Buddy Guy was the first person I saw once I knew how to play that style [blues]."

ERIKA GOLDRING/GETTY IMAGES

Q&A

Chuck D

Rap's foundational firebrand on his new PBS docuseries, the new hip-hop acts he respects, and the future of AI in music

By MANKAPRR CONTEH

Chuck D is humble about his contributions to *Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World* — the expansive, four-part PBS and BBC series where he joins other hip-hop icons, from Melle Mel to Eminem, as well as executives, journalists, and academics, in unspooling rap's history as a social movement. "My work is as an initiator and giving the platform," says the Public Enemy MC, who executive-produced the project. "I know how to cut, edit, and design audio, but when it comes to film and TV ..." Still, his voice and perspective are unmistakable as *Fight the Power* explores the symbiotic relationship between rap and sociopolitical struggles over the past 50 years. He was even more hands-on in crafting his new coffee-table book of fine art, *Livin' Loud*. "You make art for nobody but yourself," Chuck says. "The arts have set me free."

Where did *Fight the Power* start for you?

A lot of things in the narrative about hip-hop [have] usually been covered from adolescents' perspective, and I always railed against that. I first got involved in hip-hop at [about] 27, so it was always a grown-folks dialogue to me. I wasn't a kid, and I wasn't speaking to kids. It's music for past, present, and future; for ages as young as single digits up to 70 years old. I'm a big Ken Burns fan. So I was like, "Why couldn't hip-hop follow in the same form?"

You like to emphasize that hip-hop is a global phenomenon. Is that why it was important to you to partner with the BBC?

I've been to 116 countries, and to me, hip-hop is more about the world than about one little place in the United States. People in the United States seem to overblow themselves out of proportion. Hip-hop is more embracing the collective of what we are. The thing about culture, it brings human beings together. It knocks the differences to the side.

In some circles, there is a notion that political rap is no longer prevalent. How do you feel about that?

You can't waste time with people that don't get it. You got to make them go, "Oh, I get it now." But you don't cater to them. You went to college, or whatever?

Mm-hmm.

Did they care about teaching in a way that a fourth grader could understand? No. You were a student in college, and they were teaching you at that level. That's how it got to be in a lot of areas of the arts.

Another perspective is that political rap is everywhere, because of the people who predominantly make hip-hop, because of the conditions in which hip-hop artists live—

I used to have a simple saying when they used to say N.W.A was street and KRS-One is political. I said, "Well, political is knowing who runs the streets."

Are there artists or scenes in hip-hop today that you find inspiring?

You go to Rapstation.com, on my radio network. Nobody is better than us.

Looking at the artists in your Top 20 over there, it's very different from what, say, *Billboard*'s Top 20 is for rap, right?

Yeah, nobody's thorough like us. It's almost like when you watch basketball. Everybody's on a high school or college level — we're the NBA.

So is there not a more mainstream act that inspires you?

No, I mean, listen, you might have a semi-OG who's just moved into OG rank, somebody like a J. Cole. You might get great new music, like when 21 Savage and Nas got together, they just did a track. Now, when things start getting into a little bit of craziness, like a cat want to go at somebody, or drill rap ... that's when it turns into something else.

Drill is such a huge phenomenon in rap right now.

I think it's big in some places; it's big with some ages. Is it all around the world?

Ghana has asakaa, which is its version of drill. Kenya has its version of drill. The U.K., of course, has its own version of drill. I talked to an Italian white guy who made drill once. So there is a global presence.

Well, drill is bringing the collective back in a way. One of the worst things to ever happen to hip-hop is they got rid of the groups. In the Nineties, they promoted the individual, because it was easy for the recording contracts. But drill has been like, "I can't rap, but I'm part of the crew." It's bringing the posse back. Now, I'm not going to get into the texture of what they're saying. That's an angle that needs to be answered socially. Drill has evolved out of young people not getting answers for their questions.

You were about 25 when you first started Public Enemy. What advice would you give a 25-year-old rapper now?

Don't do it alone. Collectives win. Strength is [in] the numbers.... In the arts you can make an individual painting — it still takes a team to get your art across to other people, if you're interested in that. Social media's been perfect, 'cause if I do a piece of art, then immediately I got people coming to it. It's cool to have friends with a screen in between, but post-pandemic, we have to work out ways of being able to see humans eye to eye. If you don't have certain understandings of what is what, you'll be tricked and fooled with new realms of AI. Artificial intelligence ain't going to ever get dumber.

LUKAS MAEDER/13 PHOTO/REDUX

OMAR IYER

The Lightyears Explode Pop Anxiety 'Pills' on New Song

The track is the first single off the Mumbai pop/punk band's upcoming sophomore full-length album 'Suburban Prose'

THROUGH THE PANDEMIC, Mumbai pop/punk band The Lightyears Explode – comprising vocalist-guitarist Saurabh Roy and bassist Shalom Benjamin – released a four-track EP called *Mellow* (2020) and a single entitled "Nostalgia 99" (2021). Since then, the pair have also been working on background music for films and have even been chipping away at their forthcoming sophomore full-length album *Suburban Prose*.

The new record follows the band's critically acclaimed debut album from 2013, *The Revenge of Kalicharan*, and The Lightyears Explode have just released the first single off *Suburban Prose* with the jittery and explosive "Pills."

Keeping with their new pop sound we first heard on *Mellow*, The Lightyears Explode also interject the song with distorted guitars, steely vocals, blitzing basslines and a high-octane chorus with jumpy drums that are a nod to their punk roots. Talking about the track, Roy says, "'Pills' lyrically is about when I was prescribed some anxiety meds for a while during the lockdown. I would forget to take them, so I wrote a song from the point of view of the pills to almost remind me to take them." He adds, "Sonically, I wanted it to be really simple with loud and soft dynamics. I think you can tell some of Adam Schlesinger's [late American musician from rock outfit Fountains of Wayne] influence on the structure of the songwriting. We also wanted to be loud again."

Apart from Schlesinger, Roy also cites bands that helped shape the sound of *Suburban Prose*, including My Chemical Romance, Green Day and Weezer whose albums he got back to listening to after spending 2020 listening to just singles. The vocalist-guitarist says, "I wasn't very happy, and I missed distorted guitars and albums in general. I didn't just want us to make a nostalgia record for the sake of it, so some influence from our previous EP *Mellow* and new bands like Muna and Pale Waves also creep in."

While work on *Suburban Prose* began early last year, The Lightyears Explode plan to release a second single this May before finally releasing the full album in September. The band is also lining up gigs to help promote the album for when it's out. Ask Roy what listeners can expect from the record and he says, "Alternative rock with a whole dollop of pop with a punk-rock attitude." DAVID BRITTO

Corner Café Chronicles Usher in a Heavy Sound with New Single 'Homebound'

The song is the Mumbai band's first piece of music since 2021

SIDDHARTH DUGHA

ON THEIR 2020 SIX-TRACK DEBUT ALBUM RENAISSANCE, MUMBAI BAND Corner Café Chronicles presented an electro-psych-rock sound that was quite unique and served the record well. But since then, the band has altered their sound to a more aggressive rock one, which we first heard on their 2021 single "DIY GENERATION."

Now, the band have continued with that approach on their latest single, the dynamic "Homebound," which was released today and has been four years in the making. Although the new song does include a hint of their old sound at the beginning with delayed vocals and synths, overall, it brings forth a fresh approach with heavy guitar riffs, pulsating drum grooves, soaring vocals, a trippy outro solo and more.

These days Corner Café Chronicles consists of founding member vocalist-guitarist/synth player Chinmay Patkar, bassist Soumitra Vichare as well as new additions who include guitarist Rounak Chawla and drummer Yash Khona. However, the new single features contributions from the band's previous members, drummer Parth Malhotra and guitarist Swanand Thakur.

Talking about their latest track, Patkar says, "'Homebound' addresses the fundamental anxiety-provoking question that wears down every artist in their lifetime: 'Who are we in this vast collection of noise?' The song dives into the mind of an artist as they question their place, only to learn to appreciate themselves in order to continue doing what they love the most."

The band have also gone all-out for the new song's artwork. The group collaborated with Florence-based designer Meghana Kiran and sourced her outfits to create a vibrant and colorful image to accompany the song, which was shot by photographer Siddharth Dugha. The group plan to work with more multi-disciplinary artists for future releases too. Corner Café Chronicles are also working with non-crypto-based NFT (non-fungible token) marketplace Immutly to create four NFTs, the revenue for which will be distributed amongst those who have contributed towards the NFTs.

Both "DIY GENERATION" and the just-released "Homebound" are also set to feature on the band's upcoming sophomore album, *Renaissance II*. DAVID BRITTO

Nitish Pires Brings Forth Heavy Riffs and Gritty Visuals on 'Bhaag'

The track is part of the Goa musician's upcoming feature film 'Dibba Dog'

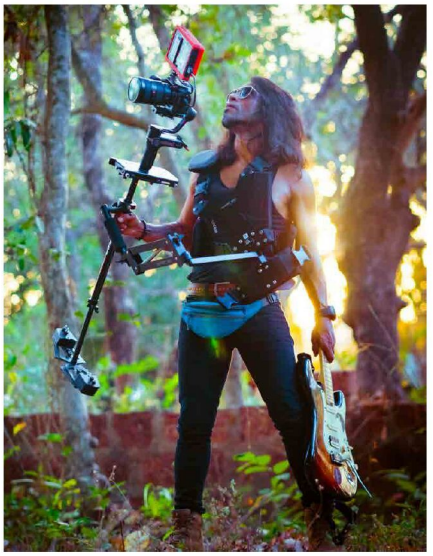
With a couple of albums as well as a number of singles to his name, Goa-based musician Nitish Pires has now ventured into the world of filmmaking. The singer-songwriter has exclusively released the first sneak peek of his upcoming movie *Dibba Dog* on *Rolling Stone India*, through a music video with the heavy rock song "Bhaag," which is also set to appear on the film's official soundtrack.

Pires says, "The song summarizes the feel of the movie and suggests the characters, mainly the protagonists of the story, to run away from this situation which will destroy their existence." He adds, "The film is about two middle-class Goan brothers who accidently and unwillingly are forced at gunpoint to become part of an underworld cartel. The story unfolds a gripping tale of twists, turns, thrills and the horror of an unknown situation."

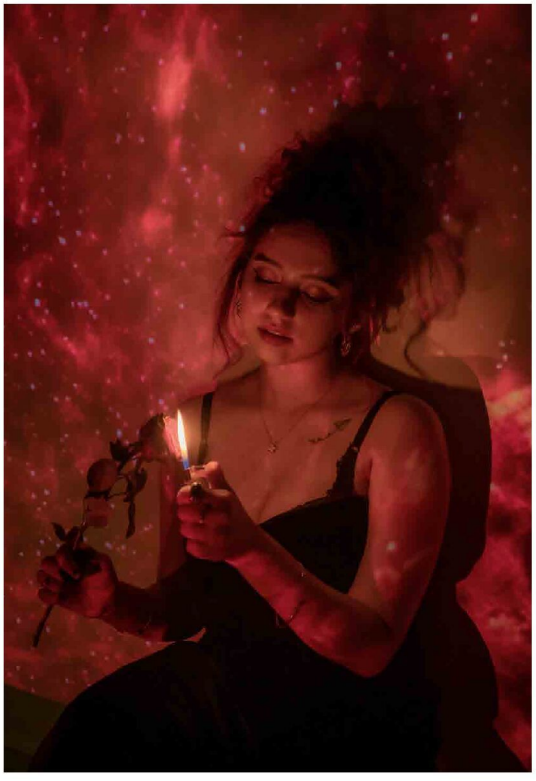
What was initially meant to be just a two-and-a half-minute music video ended up turning into a two-and-a-half-hour feature film. While conceptualizing the idea for a visual for "Bhaag," Pires decided to turn it into a full-fledged movie. Having studied cinematography and post-production, the artist was capable of pulling it off. He says, "My friend Kumar Gautam helped me as a co-writer for the film."

The song "Bhaag" itself is a fiery rock number with heavy distortion, riffs and a pulsating groove, while Pires' steely vocals add to the ferocity of the track. The clip showcases the musician performing the song while snippets from the film are interspersed onscreen. This being the first look of the film, Pires says, "It's a moment of pride for me, where I have a feeling of achievement and that nothing is impossible. I hope this film will inspire young musicians and filmmakers to become more independent to pursue their craft and art."

With 10 songs recorded, the singer-songwriter plans to release one every month through 2023, while *Dibba Dog* will also release later this year. There's even an India tour in the works. Pires says, "We are currently laying down the base work for the upcoming season of festivals starting from August." DAVID BRITTO



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Nidhi Wagle Revisits Toxicity on New Single 'Friday Night'

The track is the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter's first release of 2023

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter nidhi wagle's tryst with music started at an early age. Wagle began learning the drums and trained in Hindustani classical vocals at the age of nine and soon after picked up the guitar and keyboard. While in school in the U.A.E., the artist was always involved with her school choir and band. Upon moving to Mumbai, the musician graduated in music production and composition from the city-based Whistling Woods International.

Now a full-time musician, Wagle has released a bunch of singles in English and Hindi since 2020, and recently dropped her latest offering, the ethereal "Friday Night."

Although "Friday Night" was Initially penned as an entry for a songwriting competition, Wagle says, "After all the work was done, I actually ended up loving the song much more than I expected." The track includes a dark pop sound while Wagle's pensive vocals add to the eerie nature of the song. The singer worked with producers Shivansh Agarwal and Animesh Panigrahi on the track, while Rahul Agrawat mixed and mastered it.

Talking about the song's lyrics, Wagle says, "This song talks about the desire to revisit familiarity even after knowing the problems that come with it. [It is] essentially the story of a girl who can't stop herself from craving and remembering someone who has been toxic in the past, and these thoughts may be heightened when you're alone or under the influence."

Wagle has been keeping herself busy performing at gigs and writing new songs. She plans on releasing some of those tracks in the near future. "I love telling stories through my music and I can't wait for everyone to hear them," she says. DAVID BRITTO

Punjabi Pop Artist Burrah on 'Udja' for Coke Studio Bharat, Grammy Dreams and More

In addition to working with the likes of OAFF and Savera, New Delhi's Jasdeep Singh has also been a collaborator with producers such as Gurbax, Hashbass and Dropped Out

While interviewing, Punjabi pop singer and songwriter Burrah aka Jasdeep Singh, an unmissable background object is a big neon sign crafted out of his artist logo. "My dad got it made. He really likes my logo so he just one day went and got me a neon sign," Burrah says over a video call.

There's one here in his bedroom, another in his studio and even bumper stickers on their family car. Friends have sent him photos of the car when they spot it in traffic. He says, "I'm like, 'That's a breach of privacy, but okay.'"

The other side of Singh, a twenty-something New Delhi-bred artist known as Burrah, very intentionally public, though. Releasing music since 2019, songs like "No Love" and "About Time" made him the moody Punjabi pop and hip-hop voice. When he teamed with Bengaluru-bred producer Gurbax on "Sajna Slapper" in 2020, however, there was a palpable sense of the singer's true range. He went on to sing on "Hausla" with rapper-producer pair Yashraj and Dropped Out in 2020 and also appeared on "Mere Warga" from Gurbax's raucous 2022 album *Rebirth*.

Among his most recent and memorable stage appearances came performing with bassist-beatsmith Hashbass at Lollapalooza India in January, but Burrah was just warming up for the year. Last month, he was singing "Udja," made by producer OAFF aka Kabeer Kathpalia and composer-singer Savera Mehta with singer-songwriter Jasleen Royal for *Coke Studio Bharat*. At 46 million views on YouTube, Burrah's saccharine, sublime voice introduces listeners to "Udja," which arguably shows a whole new generational side to *Coke Studio Bharat*.

Burrah says he'd come back from a Vipassana meditation camp when he got a call from singer-songwriter Ankur Tewari's team, since Tewari was helming things creatively at *Coke Studio Bharat*. "I was in that headspace where I was feeling emotional, like I want to take flight," Burrah recounts about the lyrics he wrote for "Udja." The clean-slate sort of mindspace led him to think about the gusto and enthusiasm he wanted to bring to the project. Originally intended to be a lyricist on the song, OAFF and Savera then asked Burrah to take on vocal duties as well. "I went to buy an Activa [scooter] but they gave me a BMW X5," Burrah says with a laugh.

Collaborations have clearly been key for Burrah and he says a lot of the process – as a producer, songwriter or singer – "stumbling upon ideas." Whether it's receiving praise from his "Udja" collaborators or someone like New Delhi's Sez On The Beat telling him he's got a great voice texture or a mind for composing, Burrah's response is a bit modest. "I'm just winging it. I just have a vision and emotion that I want to express and put out," he adds.

> *"I'm just winging it. I just have a vision and emotion that I want to express and put out."*

At the core of Burrah's philosophies – perhaps specifically as a Punjabi artist – comes from growing up in New Delhi and not being fully steeped in the Punjabi heartland. He could never resonate with the music of Amar Singh Chamkila or the hardline gangster talk that's made Punjabi hip-hop famous. "I was just roaming around on a Scooty, eating momos," he says.

Burrah's music comes from being more emotionally vulnerable, but he says this while acknowledging that there are more serious matters like the Sikh genocide in India in the Eighties that he wishes to address in the future. He wants to liberate the Punjabi music community from *haumai*, which translates to ego.

Vulnerability and catharsis is at the center of "Bliss," one of his most recent tracks out last year. Burrah gets a lot of texts from people about how it helped them through their darker thoughts. There are more singles coming up in 2023 and possibly an EP.

The very public side, as Burrah, wants to go global soon enough. He wants to become the first Punjabi artist to win a Grammy and write a Punjabi song that becomes an anthem for football body FIFA. "If I'm part of that process too, that's great too. I truly believe it's possible. I'm going to work my ass off to do that." **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Yungsta Digs Deeper Than Ever Before on 'Ruhbaru' with Sez On The Beat

The New Delhi hip-hop artist has dropped the first song off his upcoming full-length album 'Meen'

New Delhi hip-hop artist Yungsta aka Yash Chandra lifts the veil on his most personal stories and struggles yet, with producer Sez On The Beat on his latest song "Ruhbaru," taken from his upcoming debut album *Meen*.

BYungsta – who is also part of rap duo Full Power with Frappe Ash – considers *Meen* to be his debut solo album in the way that his previous records like *Mehfil* in 2021 because that was a mixtape and the forthcoming collection of songs are more thematically tied together. "People know about struggles and my story, but this was a clean slate scene. There have been mixtapes before this, but the album standard had been set in my mind, much like Jay-Z's *Reasonable Doubt* and Kanye West's *The College Dropout*," the rapper says.

On "Ruhbaru," Yungsta raps about his journey so far, becoming a more vulnerable version of himself even as he retains his gruff delivery in Hindi and English. "Mental instabil-

ity/I meditate by writing," he says on the song. From trying to record and rap since he was 10 years old to learning hip-hop on a Windows XP, cyphers in New Delhi to a nod to the crew/company Spit Dope Inc, "Ruhbaru" is loaded with references that unravel like pages of Yungsta's storybook. It's topped by a sample of his father's words of encouragement and a blazing solo by producer, songwriter and guitarist Aman Sagar that closes the song out instrumentally.

Yungsta says, "The kind of production Ruhbaru has is cinematic. It immediately felt like an important connecting piece of the album, either an intro, interlude or outro." The sample of the rapper's voice is an easter egg from *Mehfil*, which also starts out with a voice note from his Full Power co-founder Frappe Ash. "It's sort of a continuation from there. This album ends up with Frappe's voice note, saying some motivational stuff that's a continuation of what he said in *Mehfil*. It just so happened that it turned out this way, it wasn't planned," the rapper adds.

While most of Sez's production on the song is rooted in atmospheric guitar licks, "Ruhbaru" is truly elevated with Sagar's solo, something that Yungsta says he needed in the song owing to his longstanding love for rock music. "I was a rock kid before I was a rap kid [...] On a very basic level, I think guitar solos are crazy. In whichever song I've heard a guitar solo, it feels like an instant classic," the rapper says.

The creation of "Ruhbaru" unlocked ideas for *Meen*'s sound and lyrical storyline, with work starting back in early 2022 during lockdowns. "I went back home to write on this beat that Sez made and brought it back, it felt like, 'This is where we start off.' This vibe, this delivery, personal style of writing... this track was the motivation I needed," Yungsta says of the lead single.

Although the rapper has been introspective in his music before, he only points to his 2019 single "Kaamyaabi" ("It's an underrated, low-key song," he says) as the closest thing to "Ruhbaru" in terms of theme. All of it brings Yungsta to talk about how he's a student of hip-hop all the way. "Up until now, we were just learning how to rap growing up. Even after more desi hip-hop came up and went crazy, I feel we're all students in some way. We're students who've learned how to rap, but now we're learning how to be songwriters, how to break out of that verse-hook-verse mold," he adds.

At the center of *Meen* – which is releasing via The MVMNT and Mass Appeal India – is Yungsta's way of using sonics for storytelling in a way that he's never attempted before. "From a writing point of view, I wanted to tell people things they don't know about me yet. I'm sure there are tens of thousands of people who know me but there's still more to know," he adds. The full tracklist and featured artists on the record are yet to be revealed but that's another aspect of *Meen* that the rapper says is concept-driven. "It's also a celebration of people around me and their stories, the friends who are featured on the album. To tell my story better, I've taken stories of interconnected people to make it make sense as a bigger picture." **ANURAG TAGAT**

"The kind of production 'Ruhbaru' has is cinematic. It immediately felt like an important connecting piece of the album, either an intro, interlude or outro."

COURTESY OF THE MVMNT; COURTESY OF THE MVMNT

ASK CROZ

Final Wisdom From the Croz

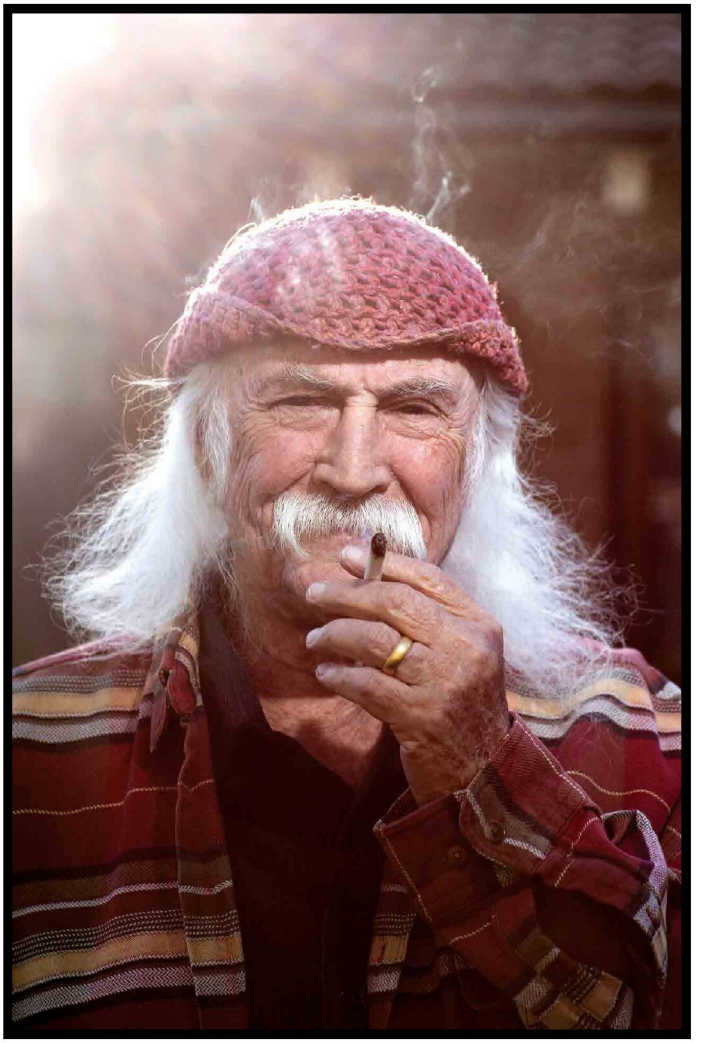
We dug into the vault for these heartfelt, totally unfiltered answers from David Crosby's 'Rolling Stone' advice column

The idea of making David Crosby our new advice columnist started as a joke around the *Rolling Stone* office. Croz was the first to admit that he lived a rather imperfect life, making many catastrophic decisions along the way. "If there was a way to go wrong possible, I did," he told *Rolling Stone* in 2013. "I could have easily died at so many points in my past. It happened to my friends — Jimi, Janis, Cass...."

But Croz somehow survived a crack addiction, alcoholism, diabetes, hepatitis C, and a liver transplant, not to mention a stint in a Texas prison. He emerged from these battles with deep scars, but also real wisdom and an appreciation for his second shot at life. The more we thought about it, the less of a joke it became. When we decided to formally offer him a chance to be our advice columnist, he jumped at the opportunity.

Questions about drugs, death, grief, music, parenting, and sex came pouring in. Croz never saw a question before we put the index cards in front of his face, and he never once balked at a single one of them. The only thing he ever asked of us was to do this with him more often. He absolutely loved helping out strangers with their problems, especially after taking a few puffs off his vape pen. "Once again, I forge out into the wilderness of questions," he said in 2021, "and try to come up with some kind of answer.... I'm old, I'm stoned ... but I'll give it my best shot."

Sessions usually took place when he visited New York, but they slowed down during the pandemic. In the summer of 2021, a camera operator came to his house in Santa Ynez, California, with a fresh stack of questions. We didn't know this would be our final opportunity to extract wisdom from the singer, who died at 81 on Jan. 18 after a long illness. But it was an incredible, hysterical session. These answers have never been seen before — consider them a parting gift from Croz.



ROBERT GAUTHIER/"LOS ANGELES TIMES"/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

What sort of deal did you make with the devil to not only live this long, but to preserve your voice? I'm half-kidding, but I cannot think of any other explanation for the state of your body, mind, and voice other than satanic intervention.

—Dustin

You're a funny guy. It is kind of inexplicable, I'll give you that. I did everything wrong.... No, I didn't do *everything* wrong. I didn't smoke cigarettes. There. I did something right. I did smoke a ton of pot. I still do, but I vaporize it since its better for you. No tar.

I don't have a real explanation for why my voice is the way it is. People ask me all the time since everyone else's voice seems to be going to shit. I'm extremely grateful. I figure as long as it works, I should use the hell out of it.

This is going to sound a little corny, but I'm an old hippie and I think music is a lifting force. I think it makes things better, it makes people happier. Considering the generally shitty state of affairs, at least in this world that I know about, more music is a good thing. I'm going to give it the best shot I can while the voice is still working.

How is it that you appear to be so intolerant to people with differing opinions? As in Trump supporters.

—Michael

My problem with Trump supporters is that they are stupid and ignorant and uneducated, and just wrong. What can I tell you, man? If you're dumb enough to believe in QAnon, I can't help you.

I think a lot of you are just too stupid to understand what a democracy is or how it works. If you believe that kind of nonsense ... man, you're going to some really funny places. They aren't real. You're being led by the nose.

I'm a single father of a daughter heading into her teenage years. I want to talk to her about safe sex and making healthy choices, but I fear it'll be way too awkward and she won't want to hear any of that from me. Sadly, her mom died when she was a baby. What should I do?

—Jonathan

Go ahead and talk to her. She wants to know, and you are her friend — hopefully. Look, there's only one real truth about sex. It's that love is where it gets good. If you can communicate that, you will have won. Sex is great. It's wonderful. I spent the first half of my life being almost obsessed with sex. But it's not where the real value and the deal is. As much fun as that is, loving somebody and being loved by somebody, knowing that somebody gives a shit about you … that if you fall down, somebody is going to try and pick you up, that's even better. You don't have to get all technical and shit. Just try and tell them the real truth, which is that love is where it gets good.

Settle an argument: Who is better, CSN or CSNY?

—Derek

I don't think "better" really applies. They were two completely different bands. This is something most people don't get. Chemistries between human beings are individual as snowflakes — very delicate and very complex. The chemistry between the three of us in Crosby, Stills, and Nash was organic. It came there of its own will.

Neil [Young] did add something, and he did bring some good songs. "Helpless" is a great song. So is "Country Girl." Neil wrote some great songs. There is no way around it. He's an exciting guitar player, and an exciting artist. He's always pushing the limit, and that's good.

Both bands made really excellent music. All of the celebrity nonsense, all of the "Oh, my God, they're playing to 20,000 people in a baseball stadium," all of the personality bullshit between us doesn't count at all. It doesn't signify. What counts is the songs, and both bands generated great songs. I can't tell you which one is better. I think it depends what you're looking for at any given time. They both did a really good job, for a while.

Hi, David. My late husband and I saw you with CSNY at the Verizon Theatre about 15 years ago. He was my best friend.

He died in December 2011, and not a day passes without something triggering a memory. But sometimes I wish I had someone now to be my companion in life, to share and laugh with. Then I feel guilty. Am I disloyal? Am I wrong to want that?

—Glenda (the Good Witch)

No, you're not wrong. You have a hole in your life. Only the passage of time will ease it — the passage of time, and you focusing your attention elsewhere. You have a degree of control over this in the sense that where you put your attention is where your consciousness is. If you focus on your husband … you have to try not to.

I don't think it's wrong that you miss him. I don't think it's wrong that you feel lonely. These are all natural things. But we can't change death. It's not going to change itself. And you have to keep going. It's OK to want someone to laugh with, to share life with. I think you should be looking. I know that's a hard thing — real hard. Being alone is real hard, too.

David, I held my nose and voted for Biden in the election even though I was a proud Bernie supporter. But Biden hasn't delivered a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, or any of the things I care the most about. I feel scammed, and I'm contemplating voting for the Green Party candidate next time. My friends tell me I'd be wasting my vote. What do you think?

—Sarah

Your friends are right. The Green Party is not going to get any votes. I was a Bernie guy. Biden is trying his best, man. And neither one of them is the best guy for me. The best guy in American politics right now is Pete Buttigieg, because he is the smartest one.

Joe Biden is a decent man, trying to be a decent man. He's not getting some stuff done because the Republicans in the Senate are holding a death grip on it and will not pass anything that he puts forward. Mitch McConnell told him the same thing he told Obama. Nothing gets through. That's Mitch McConnell. If I were a violent person, well …

Primarily, though, we have to deal with global warming. I understand there are a great many people who are just too fuckin' dumb to understand what that means. It's not really hard. As we put dark stuff into the atmosphere — car exhaust, coal smoke, oil smoke — it darkens the atmosphere a tiny bit, a millionth. It's such a delicate balance that even a little change like that changes stuff drastically and dramatically down the chain. We are going to experience weather that will kill people. Soon whole areas of land will become uninhabitable.

"I'm an old hippie and think music is a lifting force. Considering the generally shitty state of affairs, more music is good. I'm going to give it the best shot I can while the voice is still working."

Dear Croz: How can someone not have empathy for other living beings? I don't understand how someone could pass by an animal who is in distress. And I don't understand how someone could cut down a tree and still sleep at night.

—Amy

I worship trees. That's the reason I fell in love with [my home]. I cannot pass an animal in distress. If they are hurting, you help them. My whole family feels the same way. I advise you not to abuse any animals in front of my son Django. He'll rip your arm off.

We have three dogs, two cats, two horses, and some hawks that love us. I think animals elevate your life. Dogs know about love. If you have a kid, you have to have a dog. They teach kids about love — beautifully, naturally, without even trying. I really wasn't kidding about people who trophy hunt. I would love to sell licenses to hunt them in Africa.

David,

I'm a baby boomer who turned 18 years old in 1969. In those days, I firmly believed that when people my age became older and "in charge" that the world would finally be a better place, filled with "peace, love, and understanding." What the fuck happened?

—Richard

Well, I've asked myself the same thing. I'm an idealist. I wanted to think that we could do better. I think there is an innate goodness in human beings and that it's natural for them to head that way.

We are trying to evolve as human beings to the point where we don't have ego, and anger, and greed, and lust running our affairs. I don't know if we're going to make it. I believe that we will, but that's mainly because I need to believe that we will to keep going.

Whether that helps you or not, I don't know. My suggestion is don't lose your idealism. Just be patient and keep trying. If we quit trying, it all goes in the shitter.

ANDY GREENE

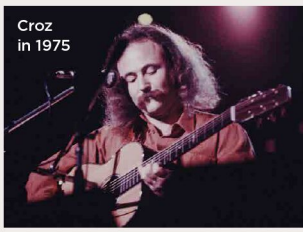
Five Killer David Crosby Deep Cuts

1. "Renaissance Fair" 1967
Of all the original Byrds, Crosby was always the hippest and hippie-est. His open tunings, ethereal melodies, and elliptical lyrics captured that vibe, as heard on this ode to a land of "cinnamon and spices" with a "kaleidoscope of colors."

2. "Cowboy Movie" 1971
Backed by four members of the Grateful Dead, this standout from Crosby's classic solo debut, *If I Could Only Remember My Name*, is one of his rawest, hardest-grooving recorded moments.

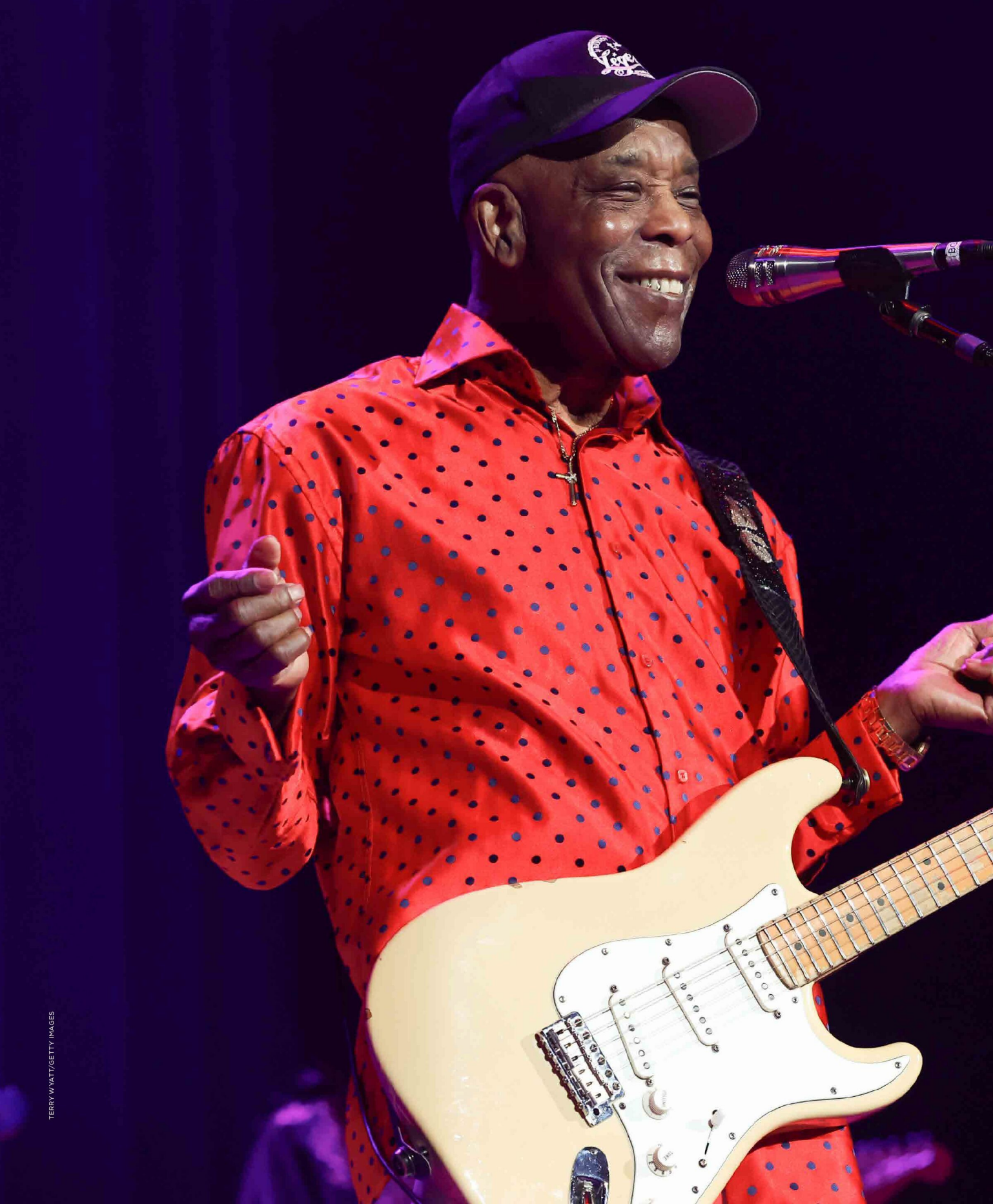
3. "Carry Me" 1975
Crosby reflects on his mother's death, but for all the grief in his voice, there's never despair. The song became a live staple for Crosby and his bandmates.

4. "Homeward Through the Haze" 1975
Depending on when you asked him, this song was either about the deterioration of L.A. or CSNY's first brush with haters back in the day. But with Crosby playing a rare piano part, it was, either way, one of his most introspective songs, with a hymnlike melody that felt burdened and beautiful at the same time.


Croz in 1975

5. "Things We Do for Love" 2016
Crosby wrote "Things We Do for Love" for his wife, Jan Dance, whom he married in 1987 and who'd stay by his side till his death. It's a tender, subtly gorgeous ballad that focuses on the little moments of a relationship, more meditative tone poem than gushing valentine.

KOH HASEBE/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES



TERRY WYATT/GETTY IMAGES

Blues Legend Buddy Guy: ‘I Don’t Want to Be the Best in Town, I Just Want to Be the Best Until the Best Come Around’

The American blues musician performed for the final time at the Mahindra Blues Festival in Mumbai last month as part of his ongoing Damn Right Farewell Tour

By David Britto

The American blues musician Buddy Guy is back in India for his sixth appearance at the Mahindra Blues Festival, which will take place this weekend at Mumbai’s Mehboob Studios. The gig will also mark the multi-Grammy award-winning artist’s final show in India as he is currently on his worldwide Damn Right Farewell Tour. As one of the few international musicians to perform in India as many times as he has, we caught up with the living legend and his drummer-producer Tom Hambridge to find out what it is that makes him keep coming back to India, how his songs are written in the studio, why he’s going to stop touring, and more. Read below.

I last interviewed you in 2020 when you performed at the Mahindra Blues Festival back then. What was your experience like living through the pandemic over the last few years?

Guy: Well, I’ve been trying to deal with it [the pandemic] just like everybody else. You notice I still got my mask on and at my age nothing hardly ever passes me by. I catch a cold every time this [the mask] goes swinging by. So, you just got to deal with the daily life and go back to normal the best you can. Because it’s out there, it’s a worldwide thing, and ain’t nothing I can do but talk about it and follow the experts to try to stay well.

Last year you released your 19th album *The Blues Don't Lie*. How has writing and recording an album changed over the years and do you find different ways to keep things fresh?

Guy: Well, you have to give my producer and drummer [points at Tom Hambridge sitting beside him] credit for that because he's 99.9 [percent] writing all the stuff that I've been doing in the last several years. It's always like an everyday life. If you listen to some of the lyrics in blues, you sound like the guy who's singing it, that it happened to. I remember the great [American blues artist] Eddie Boyd. He made a record about working in the steel mill for five long years. When I sang it one night, I think it might have been in Brazil, a guy walked up to me and said, 'How long did you work at a steel mill for?' I've never been in a steel mill, man, so you can pick up a little by somebody else. I wrote this song 'Damn Right I've Got The Blues' and I love sports and I was trying to shoot pool and I was knocking the ball out of the pocket, not in the pocket, and a guy said, 'Are you gonna play some blues?' I said, 'You damn right, I'm mad at myself.' And I said that's a good title for a song, and I went to England and recorded it. So, everything you hear somebody else say you can always take something from that and make it yourself.

Hambridge: Well, the title track for *The Blues Don't Lie*, that's the first song I wrote for the record, but I ended up having dinner with him [Guy], and he was telling these amazing stories and one of the stories he said was about [American blues artist] Sonny Boy. Sonny Boy went to Little Rock, Arkansas. He left Chicago and went to Little Rock and he [Guy] goes, 'Well, Tom, I think he went home to die.' I just remembered that I was trying to write songs for this record and I went, 'Sonny Boy went to Little Rock, he was going home to die.' And then the next thing that came out of me when I was writing with my pen was, 'Sonny boy told the truth, and the blues don't lie.' And I got chills and I was thinking about it, and I thought I'm going to run this by Buddy. When he [Guy] sang it, it was so chilling in the studio, so that's kind of how a lot of the stories, a lot of the songs as you know from these albums that we've been making, the main pieces are part of his [Guy] journey and life. Things that he's seen, tasted and experienced.

Guy: W hen I went to Little Rock, the reporter was like you. He just came there to interview me and he said, 'You know, Sonny Boy just came here before he died.' I didn't know that. He interviewed Sonny Boy, maybe a month or two before he died, and he asked Sonny Boy, 'Why are you coming back to Little Rock?' Well, he said, 'I came home to die.' That's heavy.

> **"This year I'll be 87 years old. It's time to step aside now."**

[To Hambridge] Apart from Buddy Guy, you've worked with a number of artists including Lynyrd Skynyrd, what was that like?

Hambridge: Well, I was a big Lynyrd Skynyrd fan, a big ZZ Top fan and I'm a fan of Buddy, B.B. King and all these people that I get to work with. I had some success with a bunch of people and they [Lynyrd Skynyrd] sought me out and came to my house and said, 'We want to write songs with you or have you write songs for our record,' and I couldn't believe it. They are friends of mine and I still enjoy working with them, and I wrote the title [track] of their latest record that's about to come out.

You're currently on your farewell tour and last India visit. What was it that made you decide that this would be your farewell tour?

Guy: Well, you know, this year I'll be 87 years old. I was born on a farm in Louisiana and I started picking cotton when I was six years old. Can you name a person that started working at six years old and at 87 is still working? It's time to step aside now and say, 'Let me listen to some young person.' I might still play something like this. I might go play a festival or something like that once or twice. But from point A to point B on the bus and on the planes every day and traveling like that, it catches up with you. As you get older, I learned from B.B. King a few years before he died, he had started not remembering his songs and it's beginning to happen with me now. Ten years ago, I could look at a song twice and say, 'I got it.' Now I got to keep it [on a sheet] for three months before I can memorize it.

COURTESY OF MAHINDRA BLUES FESTIVAL

Buddy Guy (left) and Tom Hambridge.

EMMA MCINTYRE/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE RECORDING ACADEMY

This is your sixth visit to India. What is it that makes you keep coming back to India and traveling this far?

Guy: The beautiful people. As you're interviewing me, I'm looking at these good-looking women. They'll make you come back here [laughs]. Ain't nothing wrong with a sight for sore eyes. What's wrong with that? [*Laughs*].

Having visited India on multiple occasions, are there things about the country that you find interesting?

Guy: Maybe 30 years ago, I could tell you some of the things that I would love to see, but man, the bed calls me like this now when I come in. But I just love it from day one. My grandparent told me that somewhere in my family they had kind of Indian cheekbones. We might have a little India in me. In the history books, they said Columbus discovered America, but he was looking for India.

At 87, what is it that pushes you to go out and play every night?

Guy: When I see a frown on somebody's face, if I hit a note on the guitar and see a smile instead, I think my work is done. See, I don't play for myself no more. I play for the people who think enough of me to come see me play, and I think I owe them everything. I don't want to be the best in town, I just want to be the best until the best come around.

The last time I interviewed you in 2020, I asked you about which young blues artists you were listening to and you spoke of Christone "Kingfish" Ingram. He's here now on the Mahindra Blues Festival lineup, which is great. What do you make of the modern state of blues music globally?

Guy: Well, I'm glad he [Kingfish] is here because you don't hear much blues no more. Everybody looks for a role model and they don't play blues highly anymore. We got what's called a satellite radio that plays it, but your big radio stations won't. They don't play [American blues legends] Muddy Waters or a Howlin' Wolf or people like that. A Sunday night blues program comes on at 11.30 [pm]. Now what kid at 12 years old is up at 11 o'clock waiting to hear a blues show, he don't know. My children didn't know who I was until they got 21. That's when you're old enough to come to a blues club. My son would play records of Michael Jackson and Prince and every time they put my record on, he would go take it off. When he came in the club at 21, he said, 'Oh my God, I ain't know you could do it.'

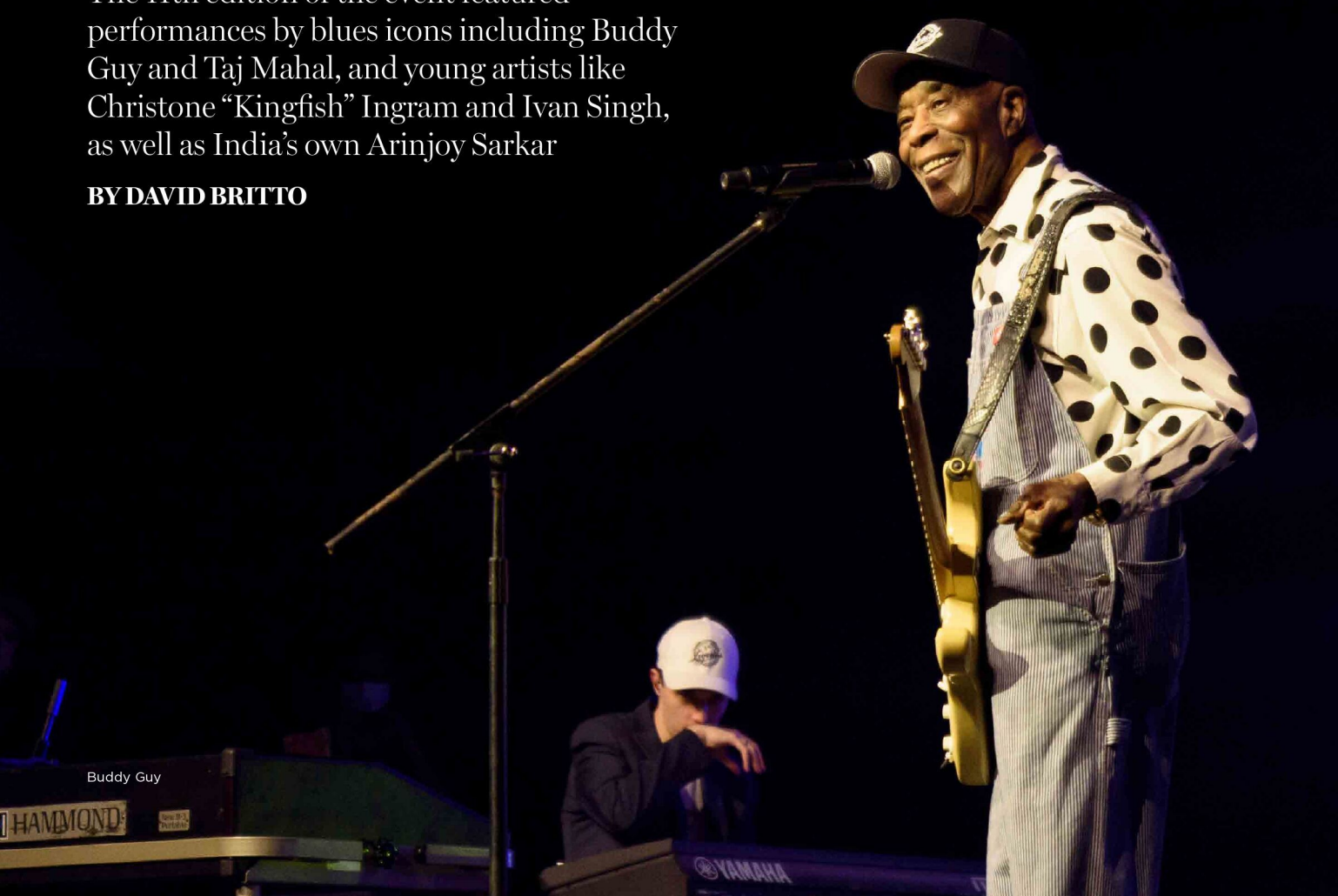
Once your tour is done, what plans do you have?

Guy: Keep watching these young people and if I can help them in any way, I will. My mom and my grandma, when we would ask questions, they'd say, 'I ain't dead yet' [*laughs*]. I'll be going places and listening to them, because for the rest of my life I still love music. Gospel, jazz, I listen to all of it.

Festival Report: Business Was Good at the Returning Mahindra Blues Festival in Mumbai

The 11th edition of the event featured performances by blues icons including Buddy Guy and Taj Mahal, and young artists like Christone "Kingfish" Ingram and Ivan Singh, as well as India's own Arinjoy Sarkar

BY DAVID BRITTO



Buddy Guy

Taj Mahal

Ivan Singh

ON AMERICAN SINGER ETTA James' famous song "The Blues Is My Business," off her 2003 album *Let's Roll*, the legendary vocalist sings: "The blues is my business / And business is good." Business was definitely good at the two-day sold-out 11th edition of the Mahindra Blues Festival at Mumbai's Mehboob Studios this past weekend. The blues festival was returning to its original home after skipping 2021 due to the pandemic and hosting the one-day Mahindra Blues Special at Bayview Lawns in Mazgaon last year.

The venue was dressed in everything blues with hoardings of past editions, a sprawling food court area, designated smoking zones and free drinking water. There were also two bars around for those who wanted to indulge in a little tipple.

Day one opened with Kolkata blues outfit the Arinjoy Trio at the Soul Strat Saloon Stage, led by vocalist-guitarist Arinjoy Sarkar and also featuring bassist Aakash Ganguly and drummer Sounak Roy. The band last played the festival in 2019 where they launched their seven-track self-titled debut album. The group performed material off that record, such as the slow blues offering titled "Nothing Good's Ever Gonna Last" and the heavy blues-rock track called "Who You Are." Sarkar was at his bluesy best as he showcased his fret skills with scintillating solos and also shared a few jokes with the audience in between songs. The trio also performed the (American blues artist) Robert Cray-inspired track called "Alibi" as well as a bluesy instrumental song.

Up next at the Soul Strat Saloon Stage was Argentinian blues musician Ivan Singh. Making his India debut, Singh talked about how it was special for him to be in India for the first time as his great-grandfather was originally from Punjab before settling in Argentina 130 years ago. Although Singh limited his own tunes from his flavorful 2019 self-titled debut album, he did put on quite a show with his larger-than-life personality, sublime guitar skills and silky vocals. His bandmates, saxophonist Gary aka G Funk and keyboardist Samuel Ocean, also backed him up with stellar solos of their own too. Singh and his band also performed covers such as the blues standard "Sweet Little Angel," Santana's "Maria Maria," the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel" and even paid homage to guitar greats like Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan by playing some of their riffs. Singh's showmanship didn't stop on just the stage; the vocalist-guitarist and G Funk also came down into the audience at one point towards the end of their set and joined the crowd as they jammed out.

Over at the Garden Stage, the Big Blues Band Hunt winners, New Delhi's The Karan Mahajan Band, entertained festival attendees just before the event's day-one headliner was set to go on at the Polka Dot Parlour Stage. The day-one headliner was none other than American blues icon Taj Mahal, who was making his second appearance at the festival.

Taj Mahal brought his brand of laidback, acoustic-led blues music to the festival. Although the large room that Taj and his band performed in wasn't the best for his softer sound, enthusiasts there to study his playing were in for a treat. The multi-instrumentalist's deft ability as a musician is second to none. Hearing Taj Mahal playing, it's quick to understand that he knows exactly when to play what note; it's marvelous to listen to. Taj also called out Mumbai-based singer Scherezaad Panthaki to join him for a cover of the blues classic "Mustang Sally." Fans were also treated to some of Taj Mahal's hits such as the delicate "Lovin' In My Baby's Eyes," the jangly acoustic song "Everybody Is Somebody" and the soulful "Queen Bee." With that, day one of the Mahindra Blues Festival came to a close.

Day two of the Mahindra Blues Festival opened with 24-year-old American blues artist Christone "*Kingfish*" Ingram making

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his India debut at the Soul Strat Saloon Stage. The musician was backed by bassist Paul Rogers, drummer Chris Black and keyboardist Deshwan aka D Vibes. Kingfish's fiery solos were totally on show during his 90-minute set as he performed tracks off his two albums, Kingfish and *662*, including "She Calls Me Kingfish," "Fresh Out," "Another Life Goes By," "Empty Promises" and "That's What You Do." Mid-set songs included "Your Time Is Gonna Come," "Something In The Dirt" and "Not Gonna Lie" before the vocalist-guitarist closed with "Outside of This Town," "Long Distance Woman" and "662." Kingfish also called on Sarkar – who performed on day one – to join him on stage as the two exchanged guitar solos.

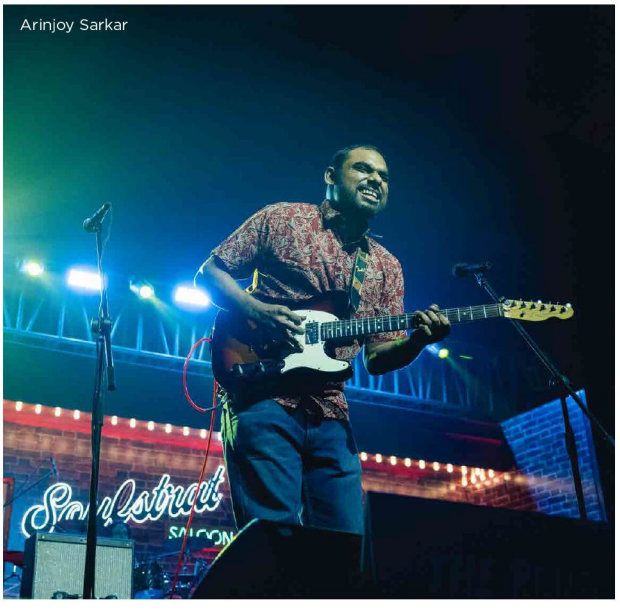
As soon as Kingfish wrapped up his set, attendees began lining up from the Soul Strat Saloon Stage all the way to the other end of Mehboob Studio at the Polka Dot Parlour Stage waiting for its doors to open for the festival's day-two headliner. But before that, there was a short 15-minute performance by the Beatz Crew and the Nanhi Kali Choir as part of the Blues in Schools initiative at the Garden Stage where they sang a beautiful rendition of the blues classic "Sweet Home Chicago."

Coming back to day two's headliner, it was the blues legend himself, multi-Grammy award-winning American artist Buddy Guy. Currently on his Damn Right Farewell Tour and making his sixth and final appearance at the Mahindra Blues Festival, Indian fans were very, very eager to get a final glimpse of the great man.

Not one to be phased by a few technical glitches at the start of his set – Buddy Guy's microphone kept buzzing before it was quickly changed by his stage crew – the ace musician carried on like the pro that he is without missing a beat. He quickly apologized to the audience and got on with his thrilling set. There was banter from Buddy, guitar tricks with a drum stick, cloth and his own teeth as well as a heartfelt speech about love and humanity. The songs he played showcased his mastery. Buddy performed the slinky "I Just Want To Make Love To You," the poignant "Five Long Years," the classic "Hoochie Coochie Man" and the emotional "Skin Deep" for which he offered credit to his drummer and producer Tom Hambridge for writing the song. Buddy Guy also entertained festival-goers with plenty of solos and also threw in a few famous riffs in between his set, such as "Voodoo Chile" (Jimi Hendrix), "Sunshine Of Your Love," "Strange Brew" (both by Cream) and "Seven Nation Army" (The White Stripes). Towards the end of his set, the 86-year-old musician invited Taj Mahal, Singh, Kingfish and Sarkar onto the stage to join him in the traditional Mahindra Blues all-star jam to close the festival.

A one-of-a-kind event in India, the Mahindra Blues Festival's niche audience definitely went home a happy bunch knowing that their favorite festival was back, alive and kicking. While the fest has also been hosted at Buddy Guy's club Legends in

Christone "Kingfish" Ingram



Arinjoy Sarkar

Chicago over the years, host Brian Tellis announced that the event will now even take place at the Lincoln Center in New York City later this year. As the 11th edition of the Mahindra Blues Festival came to a close, there's definitely a sense that the appetite of Indian blues fans is only growing and we can't wait to see what the organizers have in store for next year's event in Mumbai. Also, au revoir Buddy Guy, congratulations on a great career and for gracing our Indian shores over the years.

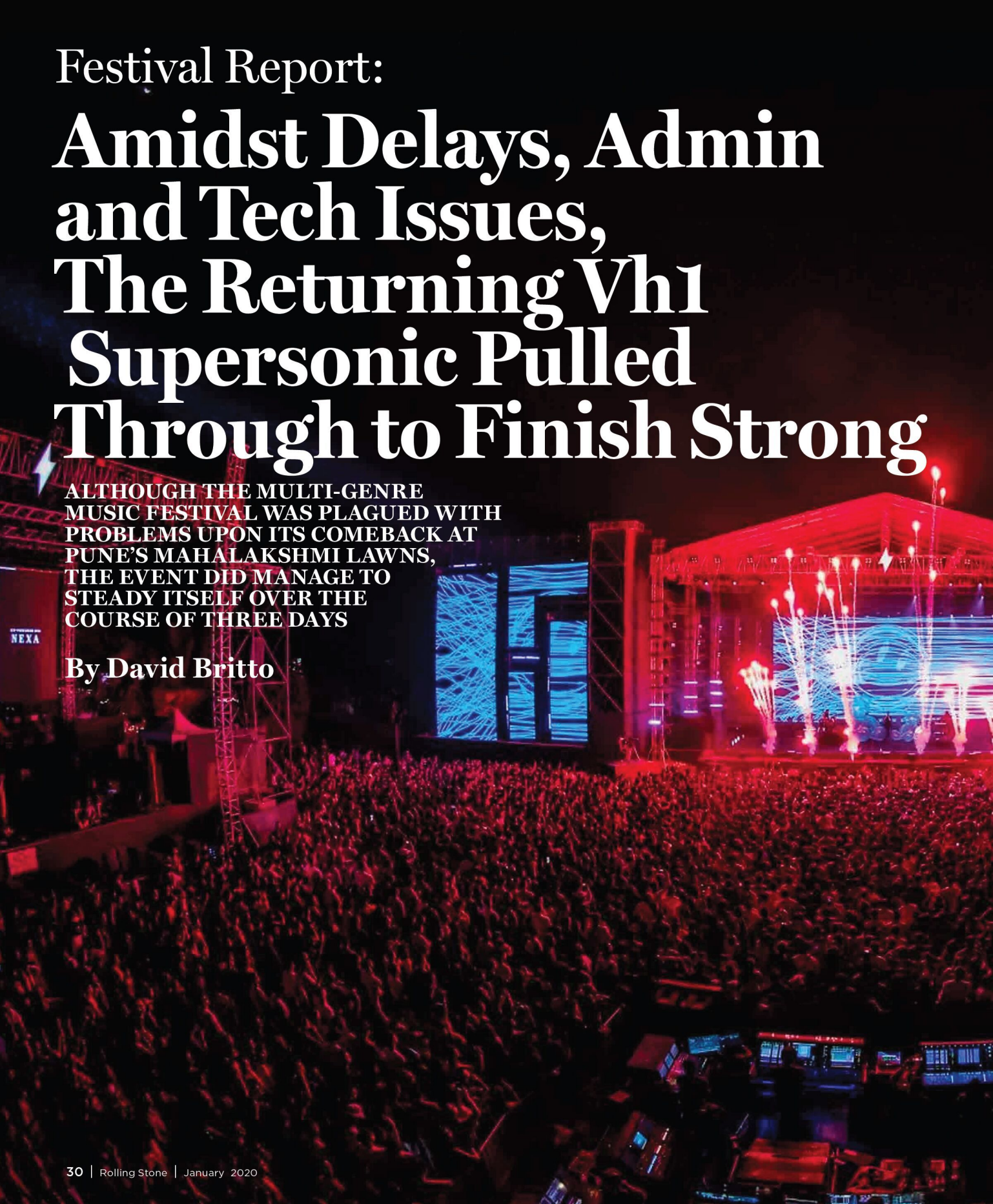
You are truly loved in these parts.

Festival Report:

Amidst Delays, Admin and Tech Issues, The Returning Vh1 Supersonic Pulled Through to Finish Strong

ALTHOUGH THE MULTI-GENRE MUSIC FESTIVAL WAS PLAGUED WITH PROBLEMS UPON ITS COMEBACK AT PUNE'S MAHALAKSHMI LAWNS, THE EVENT DID MANAGE TO STEADY ITSELF OVER THE COURSE OF THREE DAYS

By David Britto

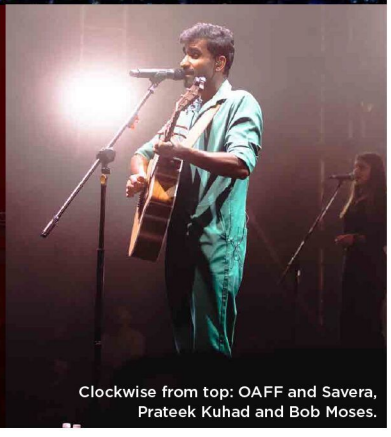


After three years away due to the pandemic, multi-genre music festival Vh1 Supersonic returned this past weekend (February 24th to 26th, 2023) to its home at Mahalakshmi Lawns in Pune. The venue was filled with artsy installations, brand activations, a flea market, a sprawling food court and bars at various spots on ground. With five stages on show — the Main Stage, NEXA Live Stage, BUDX Spectrum, Cirque Du Social (an intimate tent for DJ sets) and 10000 Lions Soundsystem (set up for reggae music) — there was plenty to get through at the event.

Day 1: Rough Start, Confused Audience, Decent Lineup

When we arrived on day one of the festival at about 5.30 pm, it was surprisingly silent. Pune soul/easy-listening group Easy Wanderlings were meant to have been performing on the Main Stage at this point, but they were nowhere in sight. Soon after, festival director Nikhil Chinapa was heard over the PA system saying that the organizers were attending to "administrative issues" and that the music would resume soon. It is unclear as to what problems they were dealing with, but after almost an hour's wait, the Wanderlings made their way to the stage. Shortly after beginning their set, they were asked to stop since whatever the problem at hand was hadn't been sorted fully, yet. After a short wait the band finally managed to play out their set – albeit with the PA system set at a lower volume – with tracks such as "Enjoy It While It Lasts" from their 2017 debut album *As Written in the Stars* as well as "Enemy" and

KAVYA.



Clockwise from top: OAFF and Savera, Prateek Kuhad and Bob Moses.

"Center of the Universe" off their recent release, 2022's *Caught in a Parade* EP.

With the organizers now having to manage set times as the day's schedule had been messed up, we made our way over to the BUDX Spectrum stage to catch Goa-based electronic producer Anish Sood aka Anyasa perform his style of dancefloor underground/techno music. We also caught a glimpse of Mumbai-based drum-and-bass artist Aditya Ashok aka OX7GEN at the air-conditioned Cirque Du Social tent. At the NEXA Live Stage, New Delhi artist Kavya Trehan aka KAVYA put on an energetic performance with her Glitch Mob collab "Bleedin' Out" and "Inception."

As soon as KAVYA wrapped up, composers-producers OAFF (Kabeer Kathpalia) and Savera (Mehta) got onto the Main Stage to mark their first-ever festival appearance together. Backed by a band and singers, the pair played songs from the 2022 film *Gehraiyaan* – for which they worked on the soundtrack – such as the title track and "Beqaaboo," and were joined by Bollywood actor Siddhant Chaturvedi on "Doobey." The duo also invited to the stage Mumbai-based artists KAYAN to perform "So Good" and Kamakshi Khanna to sing "Duur," both of whom had worked with OAFF on the two songs.

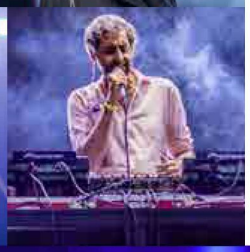
Canadian electronic duo Bob Moses consisting of artists Tom Howie and Jimmy Vallance had people grooving to their alternative dance and deep-house tracks over at the BUDX Spectrum stage, while reggae lovers vibed to the positive energy that was being served up at the 10000 Lions Soundsystem setup. We were just in time to see a bit of New Delhi waltz/gypsy and jazz-rock band Peter Cat Recording Co. before their set finished at the NEXA Live Stage and while they were performing their song "Memory Box" off their 2019 album *Bismillah*.

Next up at the Main Stage was day-one headliner, New Delhi singer-songwriter Prateek Kuhad. Although Kuhad faced a few tech issues at the start of his set, those were quickly eradicated. Kuhad's setlist included "for your time," the singalong "Tune Kaha," "The Last Time," "100 Words," "All I Need," "Bloom," "Co2" and he closed with the Barack Obama favorite "cold/mess." Kuhad was also allowed to go on for 30 minutes longer than the 10 pm curfew due to the delays Vh1 Supersonic faced earlier in the day.

Day 2: DIVINE Sets the Bar High

On day two of the festival, things were a bit smoother. Bengaluru's hip-hop/pop duo RANJ x Clifr took to the NEXA Live Stage at 4 pm and treated attendees to their vibrant sounds, proficient musicianship and vocals. The pair – who were also joined by drummer Jason Sharat – performed tracks such as "UNO," "Conversation," "WORK" and the unreleased "Fruit." The artists were faced with a tech glitch when the PA went off midway through their set, but it didn't deter them as the sound was restored quickly.

Over at the BUDX Spectrum stage, Chinapa — who's also a DJ apart from being the festival's organizer — and Browncoat provided the audience with electro-dance tunes and were followed by New Delhi-based producer Gaurav Malaker aka BLOT! who kept the party going with his crisp sounds on the same stage. Back at the Main Stage, Bengaluru act T.ill APES brought their unique sound to the festival, which included hip-hop, neo-soul, jazz, rock and more. After performing on day one of the festival with his band Peter Cat Recording Co., vocalist-producer Suryakant Sawhney now took to the NEXA Live Stage for a sundowner set as his solo avatar, Lifafa. Sawhney performed favorites such as "Nikamma" and "Wahin Ka Wahin."



Probably one of the standout acts at the festival across the three days in terms of performance, showmanship and putting on a great set was Mumbai hip-hop artist DIVINE. The rapper jumped on the Main Stage at 7 pm to a packed audience and showcased his onstage braggadocio with hard-

Clockwise from top: DIVINE, Lifafa, CKay and Tyga.

hitting rhymes on tracks such as "Kohinoor," "Chal Bombay," "Mirchi" for which he was joined by fellow rapper MC Altaf, and the Karan Kanchan-produced "Sitara" for which DIVINE invited his collaborator Indo-Canadian singer Jonita Gandhi to join him onstage. DIVINE then raced through more songs which included "Vibe Hai," "Apna Time Aayega," "Punya Paap," his Naezy collab "Mere Gully Mein," "Baazigar," "Farak" and his Nucleya collab "Scene Kya Hai."

After quickly catching a glimpse of Mumbai-based producer Sanaya Ardeshir aka Sandunes throw up her selections of some pulsating dance numbers at the Cirque Du Social tent, we headed back to the Main Stage to see American rapper Tyga mark his return to India after four years (he last performed in Mumbai in 2019). In all honesty, Tyga's headlining slot was underwhelming and after DIVINE's thumping performance an hour earlier, the Mumbai rapper was definitely a tough act to follow. Tyga's cover-heavy set with remix versions of songs like Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina" and the sampled "Ayy Macarena" was coupled with "Azz Up Face Down" and his Young Money contribution on "BedRock" which didn't make for a resounding performance. Simultaneously, English DJ duo CamelPhat comprising Dave Whelan and Mike Di Scala were closing the BUDX Spectrum stage with their tech-house and prog-house music, which was where we ended day two of Vh1 Supersonic.

Day 3: Anne-Marie's Stellar Headlining Set

Day three of Vh1 Supersonic was also plagued with delays from the onset as New Delhi/Goa indie-rock band Begum took to the stage at 5 pm, an hour after they were originally scheduled to go on at the NEXA Live Stage. With this, the organizers had to juggle with cutting down on set times once again. The unaffected BUDX Spectrum stage continued to party on with early sets from Indian electronic artists Kohra X Zokhuma.

U.K.-based British Bengali artist Tara Lily was back in India after performing at the Echoes of Earth Festival at the end of 2022 and went up on the Main Stage. Backed by her tight band, the musician performed tracks such as "The Ones I Lost" (from her 2021 EP *Lost In London*), "Hotel Amour" and "Don't Explain" (both off 2022's EP *Last Flight Out*).

Seasoned electronic artist Arjun Vagale turned up with a blistering set at the BUDX Spectrum stage with his brand of techno tunes that had everyone in attendance dancing to the music without a care in the world. At the Main Stage, breakout Ludhiana singer-songwriter Anuv Jain went on solo. We heard him perform his songs "Gul" and "Mishri" while he spoke in between tracks, most of which were sob stories and quite a drag to listen to. No doubt Jain has a good batch of songs, however, hearing them on a large festival stage isn't the best environment as it does get a bit dreary.

Nigerian singer-songwriter CKay marked his India debut at Vh1 Supersonic as he went out on the NEXA Live Stage. The artist informed the audience how Bollywood films are much appreciated in his country as he performed tracks such as "mmadu," "emiliana" and his smash-hit "love nwantiti (ah ah ah)." There wasn't much to sing home about regarding CKay's performance – apart from his sax player who was quite exceptional – although attendees seemed to enjoy themselves.

Vh1 Supersonic did do good with their day-three headliner by programming English singer Anne-Marie, who made her India debut at the Vh1 Supersonic Main Stage in Bengaluru earlier in the week. The singer's pop sound accompanied by her silky vocals were a perfect concoction to finish the three-day event. Anne-Marie's 17-song setlist featured tracks such as "x2," her contribution on the Clean Bandit and Sean Paul collab "Rockabye" and her David Guetta collab "Don't Leave Me Alone." The singer also performed "SAD B!TCH," "Psycho," "Birthday" and closed with her magnum opus and Marshmello collab "FRIENDS."

Anne-Marie.

Anuv Jain.

We thought that was the end of this edition of Vh1 Supersonic, but Chinapa came out to announce that hip-hop artist Paradox would come out to perform a surprise set on the Main Stage. At this point, folks were tuckered out and some stayed on to watch Paradox while others headed towards the food court to grab a bite and beverage and some others headed for the exit to beat the traffic.

While there were moments where Supersonic was strong, there were also glaring errors that shouldn't be happening at a festival of this scale. There's no doubt that the organizers worked hard in putting it together, but we hope that for future editions they tie up their loose ends and sail through the event smoothly. It was nice to see that the festival ended on a high note, and it will be interesting to keep an eye out for 2024 and find out if lessons were learned by the organizers from this year. ®

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Music's Next Gen

How nationwide talent discovery platform NEXA Music is building a new league of independent music stars with the mentorship of A.R. Rahman, in partnership with Qyuki Digital Media

By DAVID BRITTO and NIRMIKA SINGH

Photographer GAURAV SAWN
Creative Direction NIRMIKA SINGH
A.R. Rahman's team
Styled by SHRUTI AGARWAL
Hair & Makeup by SALON MUAH

An unparalleled platform for emerging talent

IN DECEMBER 2022, on a massive stage at India's biggest music festival, we witnessed the dreams of six young musicians come true right in front of our eyes. Singer-songwriters and composers Nisa Shetty, Simran and Riya Duggal (from pop duo Simetri), John Oinam, Medha Sahi and Shruti Dhasmana shone bright over the three days of Sunburn Goa, playing their brand of unapologetic independent music. Musicians and industry folk will tell you that an opportunity like this has to be earned over years and years of relentless passion. And these six young guns earned every bit of that glory.

In January 2023, this brilliant cohort of musicians, now joined by Hanu Dixit, rocked out at the inaugural Indian edition of the cult festival Lollapalooza, which received a record-breaking turnout of over 60,000 attendees.

The seven young musicians, who come from across India, represent not only various cultural backgrounds but also different phases of an emerging career in music. While some have been flitting between studios and stages for years, a few are grasping the full potential of a music career ahead. Each of them, undeniably talented and driven, would perhaps have had a slightly different, even arduous path to take for these elusive opportunities, if not for the one thing that connected their collective dreams: NEXA Music, an audacious nationwide hunt promoting indigenous talent among emerging artists. Each of these seven artists have been the mentees of two seasons of NEXA Music.

MARUTI SUZUKI'S NEXA EXPERIENCES launched NEXA Music Season 1 in 2019, created in collaboration with digital media company Qyuki, to support English-language original music across the country. Spearheading the project is Oscar and Grammy Award-winning composer A.R. Rahman.

The first season of the hunt received over 1,000 entries from musicians across the length and breadth of the country. They included solo artists, duos, trios and bands – both fledgling and popular – across genres. The top 24 artists were given the opportunity to have a song of theirs produced and a music video shot for it. They also graced the cover of *Rolling Stone India*'s December 2019 issue along with Rahman. The four artists – handpicked by Rahman — who eventually won were New Delhi musician Nisa Shetty, Mumbai-based pop-musician sisters Simetri, Ahmedabad jazz/prog outfit Heat Sink, and singer-songwriter duo Jonathan-Pelenuo, all of whom collaborated with Rahman on the flagship NEXA Music song titled "You Got Me."

Season 2 saw an even more overwhelming response from artists across the nation, with over 2,500 entries. While there has never been a dearth of Indian artists writing and performing music in English, since the pandemic the number of English-language artists in the country has risen exponentially. Through social media and streaming services, this new crop of musicians took full advantage of pushing the boundaries of their music. Thanks to NEXA Music laying this foundation for artists, the scope to grow as a musician in India performing in English only got better.

"Everybody is a winner and some people are slow burners; they learn and they evolve and become extraordinary in a year or two," says Rahman.

When brands innovate, inspire and impact

NEXA MUSIC'S COMMITMENT TO SCALE up homegrown musicians nationally and internationally blazes a new trail for both the business and creative ecosystems within India. Shashank Srivastava, Senior Executive Officer, Marketing and Sales, Maruti Suzuki India Limited, believes that the value of his novel IP lies in its scale and depth of impact. He says, "NEXA is Maruti Suzuki's premium retail channel which was envisioned to go beyond just selling cars and to provide unique and innovative experiences to its customers. It is strategically built around the consumers' passion points of music, lifestyle and travel. Music, being the most important pillar, needed something special, innovative and unique, and that's why we partnered with the maestro, A.R. Rahman to create NEXA Music, India's first original English music IP."

According to Srivastava, through NEXA Music, their goal is to provide a platform for young talented musicians to be nurtured into becoming global superstars. He adds, "We are also partnering with top global and Indian music festivals where these budding musicians are getting opportunities to showcase their talent and leave a lasting impression." The veteran business leader has put his money where his mouth is.

Season one winner Nisa Shetty has had quite the trajectory ever since her time from being part of the talent hunt. Besides her Lollapalooza and Sunburn performances, the singer-songwriter has gone on to tour globally and also be part of Rahman's traveling band. The singer-composer says, "I had two goals: one was to somehow meet A.R. Rahman sir before 2020 and to someday be on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. It is absolutely unreal that both these dreams came true on the same day thanks to NEXA!."

Riya and Simran Duggal of Simetri are quite the music force to reckon with, collaborating with industry bigwigs like singers Shalmali Kholgade, Ananya Birla and Harshdeep Kaur, besides being booked for international gigs of their own in the recent past.

"The right time for paving paths is now," says Rahman.

From homegrown artists to emerging superstars

THE PATH TO MUSIC GLORY is not easy. Behind the sheen and glamor of festival stages and word-class studios, there are teams at NEXA Music working tirelessly to build a dream brick by brick. The creative infrastructure of a platform like this one is expansively laid out across pillars of discovery, mentorship, production and amplification.

NEXA Music has also become a platform where some of the best creative minds in India are working collaboratively towards honing future stars. It is a feat that is unprecedented, given that most cookie-cutter talent hunts tend to look at a winner's trajectory in a linear fashion, offering prize money and at best a record deal.

At NEXA Music, things are more layered, nuanced and holistic. As many as 24 budding artists get a chance to produce their own work under the mentorship of pros and for the top winners, the sky's the limit. For season two, NEXA Music went on to bring on board a set of seasoned names such as the headliner artists including Monica Dogra, Shor Police (Clinton Cerejo and Bianca Gomes) and Uday Benegal, as well as Mikey McCleary as a composer. Rahman continued his association with NEXA Music as a mentor and jury member. Not surprisingly, this season received over 2,500 entries.

NEXA Music takes things to the next level by facilitating incubation, development, collaboration, marketing, branding and more for its artists. The Top 24 musicians who are in the mentorship program called the NEXA Music Lab, get the opportunity to elevate their skills and artistic potential on many fronts beyond just music making.

Qyuki Digital Media's Chief Operating Officer Juhi Mehta says NEXA Music is molding a new template for success stories in the creative industry. "We were just testing the waters with season one. We had the ambition, desire and opportunity of creating something new with an English music property. We wanted to invest our belief and our expertise at Qyuki into working with emerging talent in a constructive manner. We have the best production, audio, video, business, marketing, publishing and distribution partners. We are making valuable content alongside music that is richer."

As this association between Qyuki and Maruti Suzuki merges the worlds of creativity and automobiles, Qyuki's Managing Director, Abhimanyu Radhakrishnan says the time is ripe for innovation and creative disruption, "I think that's what we've done with NEXA Music... It's a tribute to creativity." He adds, "We're centralizing the entire creative world as we're excited to bring you the second season."

Season two has also sparked some much-needed creative conversations in India's thriving music ecosystem. The new podcast hosted by *Rolling Stone India* Executive Editor, Nirmika Singh is a series of candid chats which bring to the fore the pulse of the community by raising vital questions and sharing creative notes. Featuring six episodes, the guests include all the significant stakeholders in NEXA Music, including Rahman, Srivastava, Mehta, Radhakrishnan, Dogra, Benegal, Shetty, Cerejo and Gomes.

Over the course of its two seasons, NEXA Music has helped release tracks from artists such as Raghav Meattle ("Back In Time"), Aarifah ("Hey Good Evening"), Vernon Noronha ("Heartless Heart"), Temsu Clover ("I'll See You In My Dreams"), John Oinam ("Take Me Home"), Huyana ("Believe"), Trisha ("You're The Problem"), Maanuni ("Come Alive") and more. The multi-platform IP has not only captured the sounds of these artists but also chronicled a definitive turning point in the sonic history of the creative and performing arts landscape in India.

What makes a winner

HAVING YOUR OWN PERSONALITY, strong characteristics and a musical identity are some of the aspects Rahman looks for in a NEXA Music winner. However, not one to discourage anyone or take away the dream of someone who doesn't make the cut, he states, "Everybody is a winner and some people are slow burners; they learn and they evolve and become extraordinary in a year or two, or the sixth or seventh year." Rahman also admits that it was quite difficult to select the Top 24 and then also filter it down to the Top 4 from such a wide array of talent. Ask him how he would have fared in a competition like this, and he says, "I would have failed [laughs]."

Another aspect of fresh talent that has caught the composer's eye is the preparedness of individuals. "They know how to sound, how to talk, how to script. These are the things that can't be taught at university." He adds that it's fascinating to see how they are doing it all by themselves, with a little help from friends teaching them, and often putting it out as Reels. Rahman also goes as far as to say that some of the content he's seen on social media is done better than by filmmakers. "They don't have any pressure of, 'I have to make 100 crores.' They just do it for the sake of doing it."

Rahman's biggest request to artists is to believe in themselves and their art. The musician expresses that artists don't need validation from other people. "I think that's the main thing. I think that we always wait for validation. [You] can surpass that and then believe in yourself and go deeper. People will find you." He adds, "Believe in the universe, believe that something is going to happen. If you do it sincerely, it will happen."

"Believe in the universe, believe that something is going to happen. If you do it sincerely, it will happen," says Rahman.

The future of creativity and how 'songs change the world'

"IT FEELS EXTRAORDINARY," says Rahman, as he reminisces about his mentorship on NEXA Music. "When we started this, I never expected that the kids would be going to the next level of writing, their vocal textures [improving] and [gaining] confidence. So, all that has improved a lot. I think it's also seeing the opportunities and their outlet through various social media [platforms] and the internet that has given them the confidence to say that we can do better."

The legendary composer adds that this is an opportune time to invest in young India that is bursting with ideas. "The right time for paving paths is now. India is known for film music, classical music and folk music. But independent English-language music is probably the orphaned area, the ignored space." According to Rahman, the next generation of artists are fearless, focussed and futuristic. "We need to inspire them so that they can lead this nation to an even better future. Songs change the world. Songs inspire the mundane."

Indian Indie's Next Generation: Meet NEXA Music's Top 24

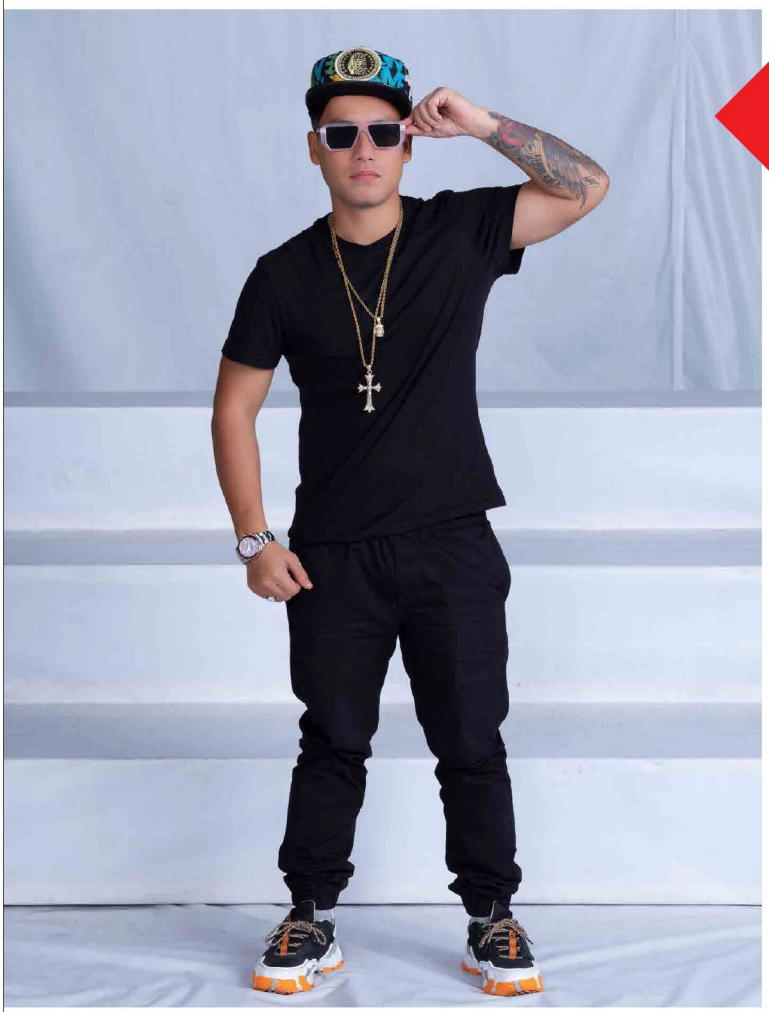
The chosen singer-songwriters, producers and composers from the country-wide talent hunt and incubator discuss goals and experiences

Afro-Pop Dreams and Millions of Streams in Sight

NAME: trisha
CITY: Chennai
GENRE: Pop
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "My goal this year is to release an EP of five to six international quality pop songs this year with a goal of achieving at least 10 million streams on one of them. It would be great to be on a Spotify editorial playlist like Pop Rising. I also want to establish my own sound and style by the end of this year. I would like to experiment with different sub genres of pop, with Afro-pop being one given my exposure to Africa during my time there," trisha says.

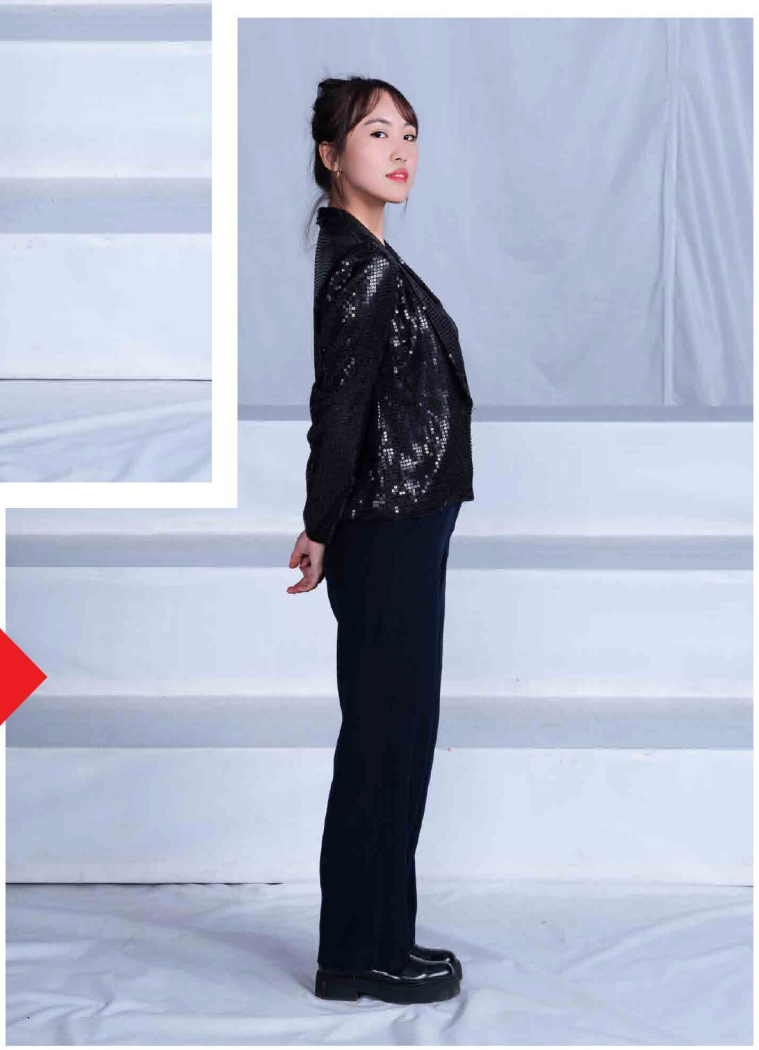
Bringing Cinematic and Indian Folk Sounds to the World

NAME: Brian Christopher Bangera
CITY: Bengaluru
GENRE: Rock, pop, blues, dubstep, metal
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I have always approached my work in music with an approach that focusses on both expression and newer/more creative applications of both musical elements (sounds/instruments) and blending multiple genres. I don't not have any specific music goal for the year but I have been considering writing/composing music of popular genres built on Cinematic elements including both percussion and melodic orchestral elements. In addition, I have for a long time also wanted to use Indian folk percussion beats as well due to the energy they bring to the overall tone of the music," Bangera says.



On His Way to Becoming a Bigger Deal Throughout the Country

NAME: Rapper Big Deal
CITY: Puri
GENRE: Rap/Hip-Hop
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "To be a breakout musician nationally. I wanna be a leader in the regional music space and a case study where I prove to everybody that music has no language. What really matters is creating great, exceptional music that strikes a chord with your fanbase to start with and then everybody else, too," the rapper says.



Energized in the Presence of Stars and Talent

NAME: Temsu Clover
CITY: Dimapur
GENRE: Indie soul-pop
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "Definitely meeting A.R. Rahman and having a conversation with him. He was so kind and intelligent. No wonder he is where is he today. What an honor to have met him! And also meeting the rest of the NEXA season 2 artists. All of them are super talented, full of passion and love. I am very grateful for finding new friends and relationships through NEXA Music," the artist says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "It is definitely making more music and to become a true version of myself as a musician," Temsu adds.

Aiming for Big Stages and Labels for His Stories

NAME: Sunep A Jamir
CITY: Mokokchung, Dimapur
GENRE: Eighties-inspired pop
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I always keep by goal big and high, whether I achieve it or not. The biggest goal I have not only this year but every year is to go on performing on some big stages, sharing my story through the songs and also to be signed by a music label, which will be a dream come true for me," Jamir says.

A Saxophone-Laced New Album Is On The Way

NAME: Brecilla
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: R&B, soul, gospel, pop
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "Release all the songs off my debut album, three of which are already out. My NEXA Music Original, "Becky," is the third song of the album that has been in the works for two years now. I'm working with Pranav Kamat who has produced, mixed and mastered my tracks and is also a dear bandmate in my live performances. "Becky" debuts my saxophone playing, which I picked up this pandemic. I plan to tour with my collective, playing my music across India and beyond," the artist says. Brecilla adds that collaborating with A.R.Rahman on one of her songs is also on the list. "I already got a chance to tell him about my music and I know that working with him will be an experience of a lifetime," she says.

More Collaborations and An Eye on Movie and Series Soundtracks

NAME: Subhi
CITY: New Delhi
GENRE: Pop
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I'm grateful for all the wonderful opportunities I have gotten till now – being a part of NEXA Music's Top 24 and opening for [Pakistani pop artist] Ali Sethi's North America Tour in Chicago as the most recent ones. This year, a goal is to expand my network of co-writers and collaborations with as many artists and producers as I can. I welcome every opportunity that comes my way, both as a performer and artist, and as a composer and top-liner," Subhi says. The artist is also keen on writing more for soundtracks off Bollywood films and web series. She adds, "I want to explore new genres by writing and composing for different projects. It's a year to observe, learn, network and grow."

Turning Important Learning Experiences Into Music

NAME: Hanu Dixit
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: Pop
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "The entire experience has been a magical journey for me. The best thing about this was that I got to meet so many different musicians coming from different backgrounds with different stories. I got to learn so much about music and life from everyone," Dixit says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "To flow with the flow. To detach from goals and let go to see where my music takes me. Also to learn and absorb as much as I can from every musician I meet this year," he adds.

Positive Reinforcements Have Arrived

NAME: Akshita Patel
CITY: Ahmedabad
GENRE: R&B/Soul, Pop
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "Especially after the whole NEXA Music experience, [I want] to get my original songs out there and release my debut EP. The wholesome experience has amounted into a quiet faith in these songs I wrote, but kind of kept them hidden somewhere in the back of my jukebox for a couple of years. It has definitely reinstated that direction for me as an artist. I can't wait to release my songs and go on make more music, play more and do more of my music. This is it," Patel says.

He's Here, He's Queer and Celebrating It Through Song

NAME: John Oinam
CITY: Thanga
GENRE: Funk, pop, soul, R&B and Manipuri folk
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "It's giving a queer artist like me such a big platform where I could express myself the way I want to and share my journey with a mass audience. NEXA Music has also given me the biggest opportunity to meet the musical legend A.R. Rahman. I won't forget the moments I spent with Rahman sir, talking about music and more," Oinam says.
BIGGEST MUSIC GOAL THIS YEAR: "Releasing new music; I am working on my album, which will be about my journey of finding myself and embracing my queer identity and celebrating it. Basically, it will be all about claiming my space in the society as a femme gay man," the artist adds.

Overcoming the Inner Critic

NAME: Niyati Mehta
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: Pop/R&B
BIGGEST MUSIC GOAL THIS YEAR: "My biggest self and musical goal for the year is be as honest and non-judgmental towards my music as I can be. It's really tough to keep your inner critic quiet sometimes, but I truly believe that once you overcome that, half of the battle is already won. I plan on writing more music and performing an all original music set this year, which is something I haven't done up until now," Mehta says.

Forging a Deep Connection with Vulnerable Music

NAME: INGA
CITY: Mumbai/Bengaluru
GENRE: Folk-pop
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "NEXA is known for championing art and the kind of exposure this stage receives is insane for any budding artist. Meeting other wonderful musicians hustling in this tough industry has been quite the trip too! The most surreal experience however was sharing a laugh with A.R. Rahman over my specific style of writing. He just gets it, man!" the artist says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "Connecting deeply with people is the thing that excites me most about writing songs. It's the only time I can share my vulnerabilities without hesitation and so, more authentic music is on the way for the year!" INGA says. She adds, "Winning NEXA would also be incredible because I'd get to work with A.R. Rahman. That'd be one thing off the bucket list."

Making The Most of the Here and Now

NAME: Poorva Gairola
CITY: Dehradun/Gurugram
GENRE: Blues, country
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "NEXA Music made sure that each contestant carried a part of themselves on set. While we all came together in a single dress code for the photo-shoot, but NEXA made sure we truly showed who we are. It is by far the most enriching experiences of my life and I'm grateful for that," Gairola says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I am focused on releasing my first album this year. It will be songs narrating the journey I've lived so far. I have wasted enough time waiting to be ready to release my music. However this year, all that will change, the time is here and now," she adds.

A Sparking, Collab-Friendly Debut EP Coming Up

NAME: Huyana
CITY: Bengaluru
GENRE: R&B, jazz, soul, pop
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "As a collective, it has created a collaborative and supportive space amongst growing independent musicians in the country. Through this journey, I've made life-long friendships and memories. Being able to speak with A.R. Rahman sir was undoubtedly an unforgettable moment and I am so grateful for the opportunity. Thank you for supporting indie music the way you are with this platform!" Huyana says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I am looking forward to dropping my debut EP this year! It's a project that's been in the works for the past few years and I'm finally ready to put my original music out there. This EP is going to feature collaborations with some very talented musicians and I hope that listening to it will be as nice as it was creating it," she adds.

A Prolific Year Ahead and A Headline Show in Sight

NAME: Maanuni
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: Pop, R&B
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "It has given an opportunity to make a sick tune with some incredible people who make the songs sound top notch. Getting to meet A.R. Rahman is a cherry on the cake and also meeting and listening to the other 23 artists has genuinely been a treat!" the artist says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "To put out an EP, a couple of singles and collaborations, that are in the works and which I can't wait for everyone to hear, out as well as do a solo headlining show, playing my original music! Probably even travel to other cities for the same would be great," the artist adds.

Fulfilling and Fueling Dreams Even Further

NAME: Bony
CITY: Guwahati
GENRE: Experimental
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "[It's only when] I pick up my guitar and start writing that I feel like being myself, at peace. Getting selected for NEXA Music that too by one of the most versatile musicians/composers of our time, and cherry on top, for my originals, gave me a lot of strength to keep pursuing this dream of mine," Bony says. "I remember the expressions on my parents' face after I told them that I got selected into the Top 24. That is one memory I cherish today even more," he adds.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I don't really have any big or small goals as such to be honest. I try to take in all that life has to offer and I try to express them in my work. In that sense, my biggest goal would be to be more personal with what I do," Bony adds.

Readying An Album That Chronicles Growth, Love and Learning

NAME: Gaia Meera
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: Singer-songwriter, dream-pop, alt-pop, indie-folk
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "Meeting other like-minded, goal-oriented musicians from all over the country has been amazing! Everyone connects to music differently and has their own story when it comes to how they found themselves walking this path; hearing their stories and connecting with them has been a treasured part of this experience for me," the artist says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "I have an album written and ready to be recorded; my goal for the year is to record and produce it so that it's ready for release before the end of the year. It features songs from the past three years that chronicle my growth and my journey into (and through) love and learning," she adds.

Coasting on Good Vibes and Solid Ambition

NAME: Tan9oCharlie
CITY: Pune
GENRE: Indie, synthwave, jazz, psychedelic rock, soul/R&B
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "The platform and recognition that NEXA Music got for artists is really a big deal, also the whole experience from day one was amazing and the people were really good. That's the best part, literally everyone had a good vibe to share," the artist says.
THEIR BIGGEST MUSIC GOAL THIS YEAR: "I have some songs releasing soon and from different bands, some of my own. I am aiming to finish at least three video songs and by the end of this year, I will start touring around with different artists, make a lot of money and repeat till I get to the top," he adds.

Exploring Genres and Going the Electronic Route

NAME: Shivash Chagti
CITY: New Delhi
GENRE: Singer-songwriter, soft rock, Adult Contemporary
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "Meeting such incredible singer songwriters has been nothing less than inspiring, It made me realize how immensely talented people are in our country who are devoting their lives to music and self-expression," Chagti says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "This year, I'm focused on launching my own electronic act under the name ChugTea. I've found that exploring an array of genres is important to grow as a versatile producer and musician. I'll also be taking this another step forward and have a full-fledged electro-live set. I've always been about keeping songwriting simple and powerful but after exploring different sounds and textures, my beliefs are getting challenged," he adds with a laugh.

Pushing and Entering a New Era for New Music

NAME: Medha Sahi
CITY: Goa
GENRE: Singer-songwriter
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "Getting to work with the most incredible, creative geniuses of the industry, to collaborate with those who are currently making the most successful songs of India, has been amazing. They pushed me out of the genre that I have always sung in, into a world that I found a new voice in, a new musical persona in. For that, I'm grateful," Sahi says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "To release more originals! I have been writing music that I'm proud of for almost ten years and have released so few songs. I have, since the start of the competition, shot and edited my first ever music video for the song I applied with, 'Ordinary.' It will release this year I'm sure," the artist adds.

An Album and Nationwide Tour on the Horizon

NAME: K.L. Pamei
CITY: Dimapur
GENRE: Country, pop, indie
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "First of all, it was a dream come true and also my biggest break to meet and talk with A.R. Rahman sir. Also, a big shout out to NEXA Music team and everyone who worked so hard alongside with us. They are a bunch of kind and talented people and it was so nice meeting and learning from them," Pamei says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "This year, I'm releasing my first music album and my goal is to do an India tour for my album."

Walking the Steady Path to A Debut Multilingual Album

NAME: Shruti Dhasmana
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: Pop, R&B, soul
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "[It] was truly one of the most special experiences of my life yet and the reasons are multifold, really! This never felt like a competition. Rather a place where we were celebrating and creating music," Dhasmana says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "My biggest music goal this year is to release my debut album. I have been sitting on it for a few years now working on it and more often than not, overthinking whether it's ready to be released. But my heart knows that it is. It has every emotion on it that I felt during the lockdown and before, in life. It is a multilingual album and I honestly cannot wait to share my sound and my music with everyone," she adds.

The artist is also excited about touring with a revamped live experience. "I've always been a Broadway child, wanting to sing, act and dance. This has a team of 17 people – my band members and my favorite dance crew. It was a dream and a goal since 2017 which is finally coming true this year," the artist says.

Serene Music and Memories for a Lifetime

NAME: George Paul
CITY: Idukki
GENRE: Indie-pop
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "Meeting A.R. Rahman sir! It has been a wonderful experience meeting the legend! Honestly, this was not even in my wildest dreams," he says. Meeting his fellow artists was also inspiring, according to Paul. "There was and is a lot to learn from them [...] This is something which goes to my core memory lane. I am sure when I look back from my old age, this to be one of the best memories I will ever have," he adds.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "It always has been my dream to release a lot of my own music out in the world. It always gives me utmost happiness when someone tells me, 'This song of yours just gives me peace of mind whenever I listen to it.' So my goal this year is to release five or six more singles so that I can connect with more people, and someday, all these people will be coming to a George Paul live gig and experiencing loads of serenity and beauty and peace through music," the artist says.

Bolstering Self-Belief On the Back of a Dream Come True

NAME: pruthvi
CITY: Mumbai
GENRE: Indie-pop
THE BEST THING ABOUT NEXA MUSIC: "The experience was a dream come true, especially meeting A.R. Rahman sir, who has been an inspiration for my music for years. It was surreal to meet him in person, and I will forever cherish the memories," the artist says.
BIGGEST GOAL THIS YEAR: "One of my biggest music goals for this year is to start believing in myself and my music. It's tough to have confidence in oneself, especially when you're in a competitive industry like music. I constantly doubt my ability and whether my music is good enough for people to hear. But I know that in order to achieve, I must overcome my doubts and believe in my abilities. Fortunately, I am surrounded by individuals who believe in my music and inspire me to keep chasing my aspirations," she adds.

When the Orchestra is a Character: Conductor Mikel Toms on Tom Stoppard's 'Every Good Boy Deserves Favour'

The National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai hosts four shows this month of the play, starring Neil Bhoopalam and Denzil Smith and directed by Bruce Guthrie

BY ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Actors Neil Bhoopalam and Denzil Smith (from left to right) on stage for the play 'Every Good Boy Deserves Favour,' at the NCPA in Mumbai

If you ever needed a review of a play from the conductor of the music behind it, just ask Mikel Toms about his work on Tom Stoppard's *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*. "It's crazy and funny and dark," he says over a Zoom call about the production being staged at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) this week in Mumbai.

Directed by Bruce Guthrie, featuring music originally composed by Andre Previn, the 65-minute play in India sees Denzil Smith and Neil Bhoopalam in lead roles. But among the most important characters, in a rare instance, are the orchestra members themselves. Toms describes the play as a perfect mix of how a story and music together enhance the narrative. Set in Soviet Russia, the premise centers on the character of a dissident named Alexander Ivanov, who has no mental illness but is deemed so after speaking up against the regime. This Ivanov ends up sharing a cell with another Ivanov, who is a genuine schizophrenic imagining he's in a symphony orchestra, as a triangle player no less.

Originally staged in November 2022, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* returns to NCPA this month and Toms talks about what makes the whole production so special, right from having the orchestra physically interact with characters on stage to the Soviet-era inspired music that he conducts. Excerpts:

What has your experience been with this particular production in the past and what's changing with the upcoming run of shows?
The first run of shows was amazing. It wasn't a show that I knew before we decided to produce it. And it was fantastic. It's essentially a very dark comedy. The music, by Andre Previn, is very much inspired and grounded in music from the Soviet period, particularly the composers, [Sergei] Prokofiev and [Dmitri] Shostakovich. A lot of what is written is pastiches by those composers. But Previn was an amazing man, he was very successful as a conductor, he was the principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. He's actually equally successful as a Hollywood film composer. So in this play, he brings those two elements together really beautifully.

It's a very unusual setup, in that the orchestra isn't just an accompanying body, it's actually one of the characters in the play. It's crazy and funny and dark. It was really quite unlike anything any of us had done before. And I think it was very new for audiences as well. We did 11 performances, sometimes two in a day, and then it was over quite quickly. I think we all felt like a lot more people would have liked to have seen it and we would also like to have done more performances. So this is what we're doing in March. There are little musical things I'd like to do differently, mainly just tidying things up.

What were Bruce Guthrie's directions for you throughout, considering the orchestra is a character?
It was great fun, because Ivanov, the character who supposedly has this orchestra in his subconscious mind, talks to the orchestra a lot, and also talks about the orchestra a lot. Although we don't have any lines as such, there is a lot of reacting to what he says. He'll insult the orchestra quite a lot. He'll say, 'I guess you've probably noticed that the cellos are really playing terribly. And so the cellos will stand up and react to that.

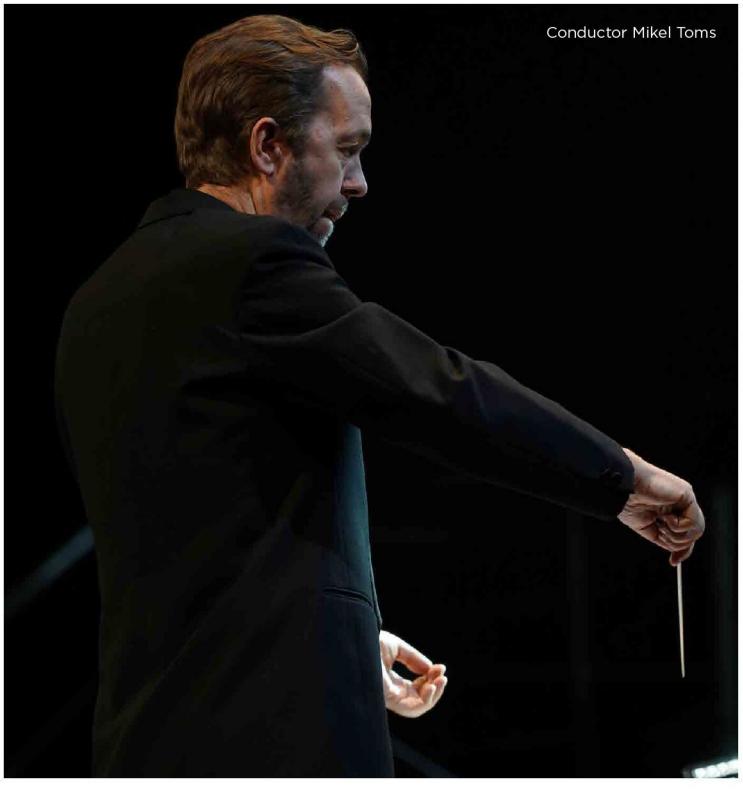
At one point, which is the climax of the piece, the general, who comes in and resolves the whole situation which is built up throughout the play. He throws me off the podium and starts conducting the orchestra himself. It's great fun.

"IT'S A VERY UNUSUAL SETUP, IN THAT THE ORCHESTRA ISN'T JUST AN ACCOMPANYING BODY, IT'S ACTUALLY ONE OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY. IT'S CRAZY AND FUNNY AND DARK," SAYS TOMS.

It's like having a role in a play for you, which is entirely new, I assume?
Yeah, absolutely. I think anybody who does this play, it's completely new for them. I think there's nothing like this. There are lots of plays that need music and have a score written, but the orchestra is usually tucked away in the pit onto the stage, or it's very much a separate thing from the action. Here, I think the actors had never worked so closely with an orchestra. It was very exciting for them to be able to work with musicians so closely.

Were there any liberties or interpretations that you took on for this staging?
There were quite small liberties, I think. Sometimes we have to make the music absolutely fit to what happens on stage. The actors would be speaking or something is taking place and we basically didn't have enough music. So there are just some places where we had to lengthen the music a little bit by repeating short sections. We were pretty faithful to the score.

A scene from 'Every Good Boy Deserves Favour' at NCPA, Mumbai



Conductor Mikel Toms

What kind of challenges did you face the first time around that have got ironed out this time?

The main challenge we faced as an orchestra was that we're normally used to not having any anyone around us. It's just us, an orchestra on-stage or in a pit. In this production, we're very closely and tightly integrated with the set. The seating of an orchestra really affects the way people can perform and the way people can hear each other and this is a really significant thing. On this set, we're spread quite widely across and we're slightly skewed to one side, which makes it more difficult. But we manage.

What have your experiences been with plays?

I have to say it is the first theater play that I've done. I've worked in opera in the past, which is a very different medium where the orchestra is in a pit under the stage and very separated. There's very little direct contact between the singers and the orchestra, even though they're working very closely together. I'm afraid I didn't have much experience with that. But who knows? Maybe there's the start.

There's a real sense of exploration with this play, with the separate departments of theater and music working together quite closely. There's a particular excitement with that. I think we all thought we need to look at this area a little more closely in future. Hopefully, it'll lead to future collaborations.

BY FRANCES SOLÁ-SANTIAGO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAMILA FALQUEZ

YOUNG MIKO, RAINAO, PAOPAO, VILLANO ANTILLANO, AND CHESCA (FROM LEFT)
LETTERING BY JUAN CARLOS PAGAN

llega de poder

HOW PUERTO RICAN WOMEN ARE REVOLUTIONIZING REGGAETON

CHESCA

PRODUCED BY CAROLINA WOLF AT WORLD JUNKIES INC. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY CAROLINA RUIZ. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY JOSÉ GONZALEZ COTTO. GLORIMAR CRESPO AND CATALINA LAMBOY. RAINAO: HAIR AND MAKEUP BY KAMILA PIÑERO. STYLING BY GABRIELA LUCIA CARTAGENA RUIZ FOR LUCIA LAB. CHESCA: HAIR BY JANEL MERCADO. MAKEUP BY YOANIE BENOIT. STYLING BY SIMEL PINES SANTANA. ELA: HAIR BY GABRIELA MARIA CORRETJER CONTRERAS. YOUNG MIKO: HAIR BY DOLLS BEAUTY STUDIO. MAKEUP BY KAMILA PIÑERO. STYLING BY GABRIELA MARIA CORRETJER CONTRERAS. YOUNG MIKO: HAIR BY DOLLS BEAUTY STUDIO. HAIR COLORING BY DIANA LÓPEZ. MAKEUP BY JONUEL NADER LÓPEZ. STYLING BY DIAL UP M. VILLANO ANTILLANO: HAIR BY JAN FIGUEROA RIBOT. MAKEUP BY GIOVANNIE BERDECÍA COTTO. STYLING BY VLADIMIR ALVIRA.

CHESCA: COAT BY **CURRENT MOOD.** JEWELRY BY **LUCKY FLIRTS. RAINAO:** BODYSUIT BY **HAUS LUCIA.**

LAST JULY, when Bad Bunny played three sold-out shows in Puerto Rico, the superstar — who was the most streamed artist in 2022 — took a moment to pass the mic. Sure, he's done this before: His performances have become global spectacles that have included appearances from artists like J Balvin, Romeo Santos, and Cardi B. But these weren't normal Bad Bunny concerts. He was returning to his home island to kick off his first stadium tour after dropping the record-shattering, history-making album *Un Verano Sin Ti*. Thousands of people waited to see what Bad Bunny would do — and who he might bring out.

On the first night, the audience exploded into cheers as Bad Bunny revealed an unexpected guest: the barrier-breaking trans rapper Villano Antillano. She stepped onstage wearing a satin jacket with sky-high platforms that made her look like a superhero, then proceeded to fire off bar after bar from her viral freestyle session with the Argentine producer Bizarrap, which currently has 179 million views on YouTube. The next night, Bad Bunny made way for Young Miko, the 24-year-old artist from Añasco, whose sleek, swaggy delivery sent her bouncy trap single "Riri" flying up the charts. By the end of her cameo, the entire crowd was screaming for an encore. The saxophonist-turned-vocalist RaiNao took the spotlight on the third night. Dressed in a see-through T-shirt made by Puerto Rican designer Namibia Viera, she was fearless as she belted out her ballad "Luv."

The gesture was monumental. Bad Bunny could have brought out any artist he wanted. Instead, he co-signed a women-led revolution that's been brewing in Puerto Rico over the past several years.

Since 2018, women and LGBTQ folx in Puerto Rico have been powering a scene that's been virtually unheard of in the male-dominated world of reggaeton and urbano. Antillano, Young Miko, and RaiNao are just a few of the names who have been attracting listeners, each bringing her own style and perspective to the genre. Antillano, who got her start releasing underground mixtapes in San Juan, was one of Latin music's biggest breakthrough artists of 2022, thanks to her nimble rap skills and honest songwriting. Young Miko, an openly lesbian lyricist, used money she made as a former tattoo artist to pay for studio time and has put her experiences into trap songs that uplift the LGBTQ community. RaiNao, a graduate of the Escuela Libre de Música, combines her background as a musician and former vocalist for artists like Rafa Pabón to create her own sound.

The list doesn't end there. Paopao's moody soundscapes and edgy goth-kid aesthetics have turned heads, with Tidal singling her out as a Rising Artist to Watch in 2023. Singer Chesca has been racking up millions of views on YouTube with ebullient empowerment anthems like "TuTuRu." Meanwhile, the folkloric reggaeton of Ana Macho and the psychedelic sounds of Cita prove how multifaceted this new generation is.

"This is an entirely new dynamic, where so many feminine voices are rising," Antillano tells Rolling Stone. "It's a beautifully historic moment."

None of these artists are strangers to urbano. They were raised on reggaeton, the archipelago's street soundtrack that started with late-Nineties recordings of Vico C, the Noise, and DJ Playero before reaching its current commercial and global apex. RaiNao remembers listening to artists like Tego Calderón and Héctor el Father on school field trips in her neighborhood of Santurce. "Our generation saw it go from underground to the mainstream," she says.

Yet few women were allowed to join the ranks of reggaeton's heavyweights. There was, of course, the boundary-pushing pioneer Ivy Queen, known for early reggaeton feminist anthems like "Yo Quiero Bailar," and La Sista, whose bomba-infused beats and gritty lyricism defined her 2006 album, *Majestad Negroide*. But the landscape was primarily a boys' club where women were often relegated to the background, away from the spotlight. "For a long time, the market — directed mainly by men — only had space for one," Antillano says. "Being a woman is something so flat to them that just one is enough."

> "I'M SO FORTUNATE AND PROUD TO BE IN THIS CIRCLE OF WOMEN WHO ARE FIGHTING EVERY DAY TO BE HEARD, SEEN — TO CHANGE THE RULES."

As reggaeton expanded internationally in recent years, female artists from other countries, like Karol G from Colombia and Natti Natasha from the Dominican Republic, created a presence for women on the charts with pop-infused hits. Still, in Puerto Rico, the cradle of reggaeton, women remained on the periphery in a genre that talked about them but rarely let them speak for themselves — until now. They're demanding attention and getting recognized by the world, impressing even Bad Bunny, and breaking the doors to the industry wide open.

THESE CHANGES didn't happen overnight. According to Patricia Velázquez, co-founder of Hasta 'Bajo Project, a multiplatform organization dedicated to archiving and dissecting reggaeton's history, the social and political turmoil in Puerto Rico has empowered a young generation to demand more inclusion — and the urbano scene has finally begun to shake off outdated attitudes rooted in colonialism and patriarchy.

Since 2016, Puerto Ricans have lived through a chain of political upheavals and natural disasters: the appointment of the fiscal control board enacted by the U.S. government's PROMESA bill, which has cut budgets, pensions, and other resources; governmental neglect from local and federal authorities in the aftermath of Hurricane María; 2020 earthquakes that rocked southwestern Puerto Rico; and the coronavirus pandemic that left thousands dead. All of these events have heightened silent crises of domestic violence and mental health. Following Hurricane María, a local report found that suicide rates spiked by 50 percent, while femicides as much as doubled, causing the government to declare a state of emergency in 2021, which feminist organizations had been calling for since 2018.

"This [movement] is the work of many sectors, from feminist and LGBTQ activists to anti-racist and anti-colonial groups," Velázquez says. "Their work has allowed for the genre to change. Because audiences are more open and inclusive, their world has changed around them."

Living in an archipelago plagued by colonial policies, a decades-long economic crisis, and alarming rates of violence against women has pushed this generation back to reggaeton's radical political roots. "Reggaeton has always been transgressive, speaking against the government and narrating real experiences," Velázquez says.

One example of that sharp transgressiveness is "Mujer," a song from Antillano's debut album, *La Sustancia X*, that features the Puerto Rican artist iLe. They end the track by naming victims of gender violence in a powerful acknowledgment of a femicide and transfemicide crisis that, according to the Observatory of Gender Equity in Puerto Rico, killed more than 60 women in 2022. Antillano also mentions Puerto Rico's 2019 protests, a

PAOPAO

TOP BY VENDALI. SUIT BY LOVE SICK LONDON. JEWELRY, PAOPAO'S OWN. SHOES BY DR. MARTENS.

YOUNG MIKO

ON LOCATION
Each artist was photographed at Taller Comunidad la Goyco, a beloved cultural center dedicated to celebrating and empowering Puerto Ricans in the San Juan neighborhood of Santurce. The space was established by community leaders who renovated and transformed an abandoned public school, one of nearly 700 that permanently closed in the past decade and a half amid economic and natural devastation on the archipelago. Many of the center's efforts were spearheaded by the late Héctor "Tito" Matos, the legendary percussionist, educator, and master of bomba and plena — distinctly Afro-Puerto Rican art forms and musical traditions that have shaped reggaeton and urbano music today.

YOUNG MIKO: TOP BY DIESEL. PANTS BY MARCHEGA. JEWELRY BY VITALY. SHOES BY NAKED WOLF. VILLANO ANTILLANO: DRESS BY NAMILIA. SKIRT BY HECTOR OMAR.

catalyst for her own political awakening that erupted after a leaked Telegram chat revealed then-Gov. Ricardo Rosselló and close officials had been mocking members of the local feminist organization Colectiva Feminista en Construcción. "Since it's something so important and sacred for me, I wanted the song to rise to the moment," Antillano says. "We know what it's like to be a woman in this country and the violence that we're all subject to." In the chorus, she repeats, "*Soy una mujer, llena de poder,*" which means, "I'm a woman, full of power."

These paradigm shifts have disrupted the traditional notions of storytelling in the genre. Sexualized lyrics and romantic pop fusions are common in reggaeton and Latin trap, but these rising artists have new narratives and experiences to share. On songs like "Riri" and "Bi," Young Miko sings directly to women, speaking authentically to her identity as a queer woman. Her EP *Trap Kitty* features audio recorded inside a strip club in Puerto Rico, giving listeners a view into archipelago nightlife from another perspective. "It's just this empowerment toward my whole community, and that's something really beautiful, that they feel they have a space to be themselves and feel badass," she says. Chesca, too, has been encouraging women to celebrate themselves through her songs. "I want women to feel free, confident, and secure in themselves," she says.

This generation isn't just offering powerful new messages; they're upending the very sound of urbano. At a showcase in Mayagüez last year, RaiNao threw a chilling saxophone interlude into a set that also mixed rock, reggae, and electronic production. Paopao, a graduate of the University of Miami's Frost School of Music and a Latin Grammy-winning composer, is reimagining the genre: Her tropical-goth approach blends EDM, trap, and reggaeton with the emotional punch of a pop ballad — portraying the strength of "sad girls at the club."

Despite the successes these women have achieved, they're still up against an old-school, misogynistic mindset embedded in music. Last year, Antillano and the Dominican rising star Tokischa performed at a club in Puerto Rico, where the two kissed onstage. Soon after, reggaetonero Omy de Oro took to Instagram and griped that the performance gave him "secondhand embarrassment." Shortly after, the rapper Cosculluela said the genre was turning into "a cage full of gays," igniting a back and forth with Antillano, who called out his homophobic remarks.

The new scene has also faced resistance from a narrow-minded industry that doesn't always see the full scope of their talent. Paopao says that after she released her debut EP, *Diamantes y Espinas,* in 2022, her label had doubts about her artistry. "They said they weren't sure of the sound and my image and didn't want me to release more music for the rest of the year," she remembers, adding that they described it as "dark and weird." But a few days later, Bad Bunny shared her song "algo así" on his Instagram, proving how much people were connecting with the music.

There's one more thing that defines this scene: the camaraderie and friendship within the group. A few weeks after playing with Bad Bunny, Antillano, Young Miko, and RaiNao performed at a local music festival, where they posed for a photo in a sororal hug that went viral on Puerto Rican Twitter. This generation is thriving by nurturing a sisterhood that's revolutionizing urbano, and it goes beyond friendly hugs: Antillano has collaborated with Young Miko, RaiNao, and Chesca, while RaiNao and Paopao recently debuted a single together. For Chesca, it's about time they take over: "I'm so fortunate and proud to be in this circle of women who are fighting every day to be heard, seen — to change the rules, to motivate and inspire others," she says. "It's like 'Let's go girls!'"

PHOTO COURTESY OF GMMTV

‘I am a People Person’: Luke Ishikawa Plowden

The multilingual, multitalented artist tells us about his favorite genre, how he perceives his own physicality to be, and how – despite being a people person – he is not a people pleaser

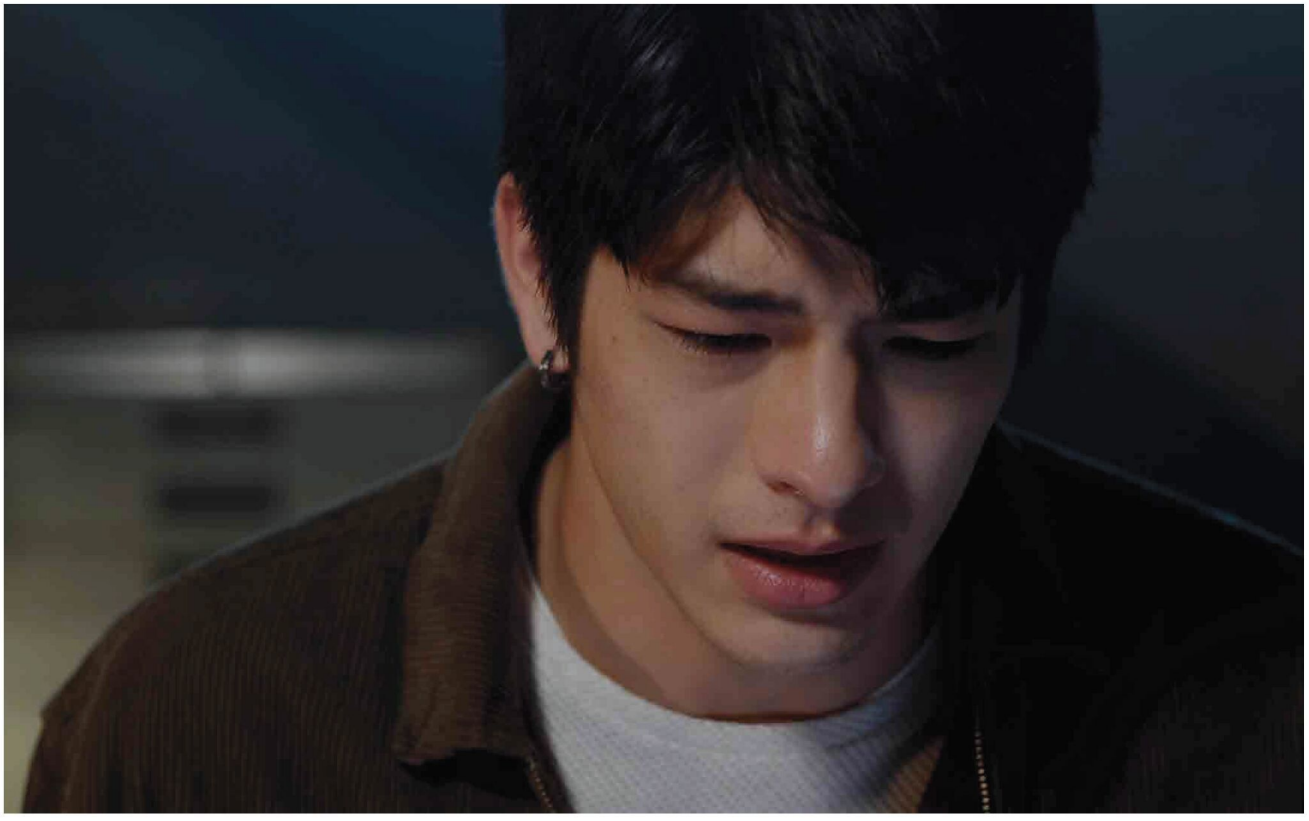
BY DEBASHREE DUTTA

Luke Ishikawa Plowden, whom I picture as the eponymous Donovan (from *My Dear Donovan*), may or may not think of himself as offbeat. But I do, and I'm willing to wager that he does, too. He is a key player in the burgeoning Thai entertainment scene at the age of 27. *My Dear Donovan* intrigued me because of his imposing screen presence. I subsequently saw some of his other stirring displays. In the interim, I realized that Luke is originally Japanese-American (at present, a popular Thai actor fluent in the language). I'm curious about this journey.

"First of all, thank you so much, *Rolling Stone India*, for giving me this opportunity. Yeah, it's really interesting that you say this because I've spent some time thinking about it, but not a lot about thinking like, 'Wow, am I one of the first foreigners to come to Thailand, learn Thai, and then develop an acting career here?' I may be – I'm not super sure – but I guess at this point, it would seem that I've sort of reached a level of success where people are starting to take notice." As far as his journey is concerned, the actor dubs it "quite an incredible one." Anecdotally, it has taken him from a small town in Pennsylvania to a place in college, then finding out that he could become a model overseas, then learning Thai in no less than Thailand, and then to a point when he first started acting – when he did his first series three years ago. "It's been an incredible journey," Luke reiterates. "I can't; it's hard to summarize it all."

It really is incredible! He has fared incredibly well thus far. His multilingualism – another trait about him that prompted me to conduct this interview – must have been a disguised boon in the first place. Being a passionate Korean language student myself, I can vouch for the advantages of being conversant in another language. And Luke speaks Thai with ease! Even so, mastering a language that places you on an equal footing with native speakers of that language is a difficult undertaking. Did exploring new environments and picking up new accents during his formative years have an impact on him?

"Yes, I think that's the case," the actor says. "Studying different languages while growing up helped me become more open-minded



> “I think there's sort of this environment of optimism around the Thai film industry that if you make a project, it can go bigger than just in Thailand, and I think that's really good.”

about learning new ones and be more committed to learning the language and asking something like ‘OK, what is it?’” As a result, he spent nine months, between the ages of one and two, in Brazil, where he spoke a mix of Portuguese and English thanks to his surroundings. Later, he took Spanish as an elective subject in high school for a while, before pursuing Mandarin in college. “I briefly considered majoring in Mandarin. I think that if anything helps me the most with the Thai language, it's that Mandarin is also a tonal language.”

Thailand obviously loves him, and Luke delights in being engulfed in that wave of adulation. I believe that in order to get to where he is today at work, he had to develop both his own aspirations and those of others who employed him to do so. And if he thinks back to the past, did he have issues to deal with? “Hmm. When I think about that, and of my position in the industry now, something that I'm a little bit sad about is that I didn't get into this industry earlier. I only realized that entertainment and acting and music were my calling. It was my sort of destiny, relatively late. And as far as the entertainment industry is concerned, people typically tend to get in and start acting pretty young in order to have very long careers – 15 or 16 years old is honestly the ideal age. But now, given where I am, I think it's OK. I think I managed to commit very early on and as soon as I knew that this was the path I wanted to take, I really went in 100 percent.”

This should be evident. The actor has made the most of himself by stoking the latent embers of potential into flames of success. He has matured into what he set out to be: a charismatic star with boundless energy while also being someone who is friendly and eager to lend a hand. “I love to help people in general. I really like people. I'm a people person. I'm not necessarily a people pleaser, but I definitely enjoy being around people,” he reveals, alongside a slew of other things as we progress through this in-depth exchange. Read the edited excerpts below as Luke Ishikawa Plowden gets up close with *Rolling Stone India*.

What about acting appeals most to you? Are you an instinctive actor or a director's actor?

I think I'm a little bit of both. OK, so for the first part of the question, what about acting appeals to me? I think it's a beautiful way to get in touch with your emotions. Um, I feel most alive in two scenarios.

The first is when I'm on set and I'm playing a character, and am completely engrossed in that character. I feel who they are. I feel all of their emotions. And I'm just completely in the moment and that's just such an incredible feeling.

"I really like long action scenes. I love stunts. I think the more that I do stunts on my own, the more I'll be fulfilled and happier. I really like those kinds of high-energy scenes."

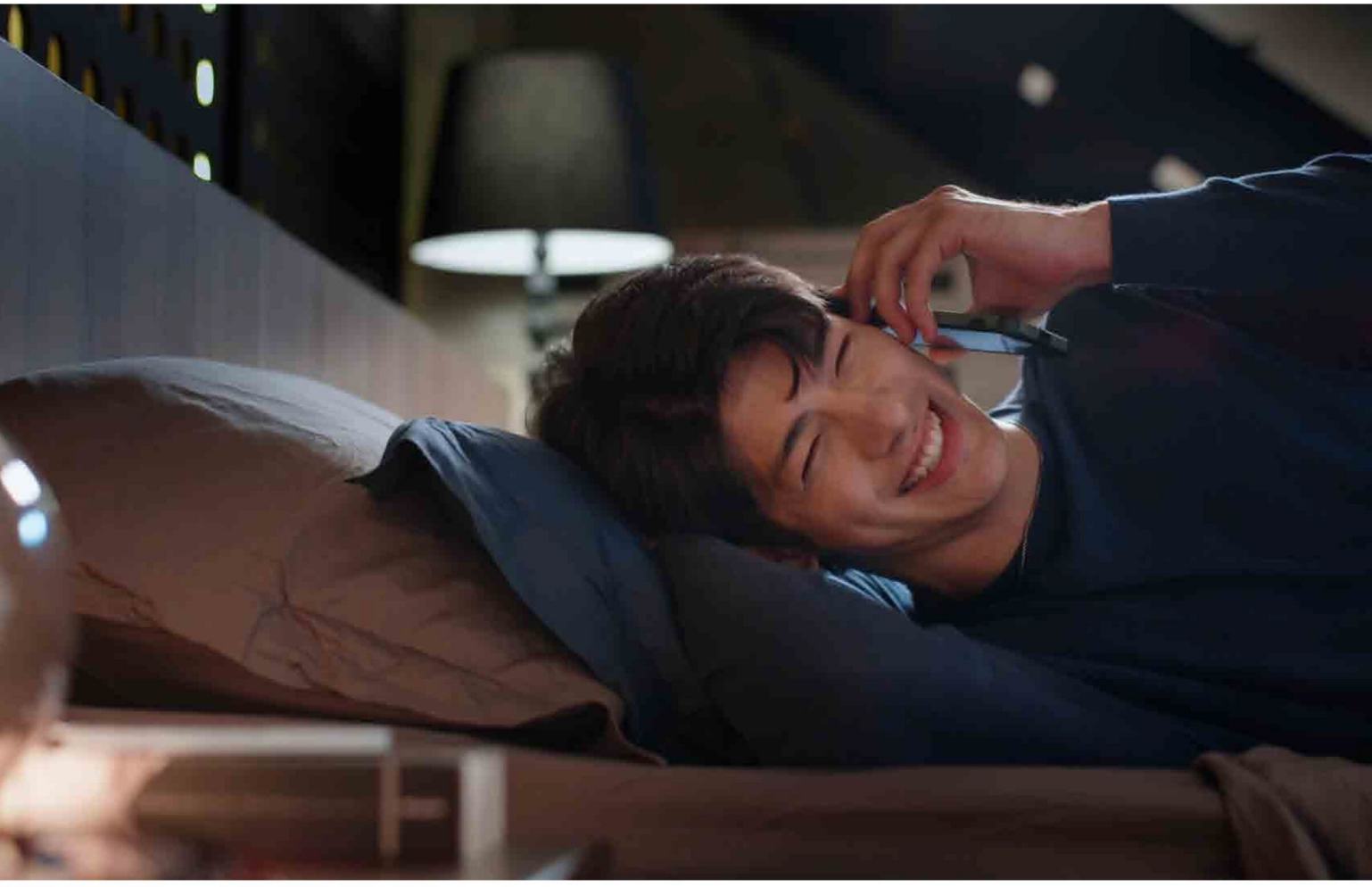
The second feeling is when I'm performing onstage. But as far as acting is concerned, it's definitely about completely nailing a scene and doing it well. As for being an instinctive actor or a director's actor, I think I like to develop both sides. I think it's important to be both. It's important to have really good acting instincts, but it's also really important to be able to take a director's feedback and know that film in general is a director's medium. What does that mean? That means that a film is created by the director and the editing team, and so you have to completely trust the performance that you gave if the director doesn't want another take

that you did. And then if the director asks for another take and gives you feedback on it, you better give it 100 percent and you better accept that feedback, and just do it because that's how the film is going to be better and that's how you're going to look better. That's how everything is going to go well. So, it's important to have both in yourself – to have good acting instincts and also be very open to directors' feedback.

I believe that every time an actor portrays a character, it's crucial for them to look genuinely different, by appreciable amounts. How do you go about that?
I completely agree. I think whenever you portray a new character, it's important for you if you want to give a good performance, to completely know the person you're playing. And the way I do that is by creating in my head, or writing on paper or somewhere, a map of my character's life from when they were born to different core memories in their life, to where they are in the script now. That requires a lot of imagination. But you need to spend the time to do that. And then how do you create those memories and give details to those memories? Well, that's where the research comes in. That's where you look to the script, you look to the director for guidance. But if you don't have a lot of those resources, like in Thailand, you have to be very creative with your choices. And so, when you're developing that character map, you can sometimes even have a lot of freedom with the memories that you make for your character. But yeah, so that's my method. I have in my head the whole life story [of the character], from where they were born to who they were close to, what the core memories that make that person up are, and who they liked when they were younger. What experiences have made them who they are? And if you don't have answers to those questions, then your character might end up being a little shallow [laughs].

You have the looks and the form because you're also a well-known model. These are traits that make it a little bit simpler for a person to stand out. Do you believe that good looks occasionally stereotype you as an artist, though?
That's a really interesting question. Well, for me, because I grew up in the States, my look is, well, I'm by no means ugly in the States. But I'm also not like one of the 10-out-of-10 drop-dead gorgeous guys in America. While I was able to do modeling in the States, it was only for one job and it wasn't for like a Calvin Klein or for, like, an underwear or a, I don't know, like a cologne advertisement or something like that. So, in the States, I don't think I was really stereotyped as that kind of an artist-model personality.

But in Thailand? I guess the honest answer is that when I tend to meet people... OK, never mind, I'll phrase it this way: if I meet strangers who have no idea of who I am, they will typically think that I am in the industry somehow. So, I guess [laugh-



ing], um, I guess the short answer is that in Thailand, yes, the answer would be yes. I do tend to be stereotyped as an artist type or as an actor type. But that has not always been the case throughout my life [laughs].

In light of the characters, you've portrayed thus far, how do you envision your career developing?
So, I'm in a nice position where I think I more or less can pick the sort of direction that I want to go in, at least with projects outside of GMMTV. There will be other movies that I'll get offers to do or I'll get offers to do shows, and I think the kind of role, the sort of direction I want to go in is action, thriller, drama – that sort of genre of film in Thailand because I think it fits my personality and my look the most, and also, it's just what I like to do.

I really like long action scenes. I love stunts. I think the more that I do stunts on my own, the more I'll be fulfilled and happier. I really like those kinds of high-energy scenes, and then I like epic films, films of a big scale where there are lots of things going on, maybe explosions and just lots of things at stake. I like that kind of genre. I'm also open to other genres if the character seems really interesting, the storyline seems really interesting. I'm always open to different roles, but as for the direction that I want to go in, I think it's going to be more of the action sci-fi thriller field.

Which of your on-screen characters do you most connect with and why?
Well, there are two characters. But the one that I've spent the most time with and let closest to my heart is Donovan, because he's basically me, but with a much darker past than I've had in my life. He's an American. He's a model. He came from the U.S. to Thailand. I think the producers from GMMTV kind of saw this story and knew, 'OK, Luke is going to play this role and he's going to be really good in it,' and I'm really glad that they did. So, he's been closest to my heart, because I think he's just me but me with an edgier side.

What according to you is the reason behind the rising popularity of Thai content?
So, according to me, it's because of the better quality of the series being produced. I think Thailand is growing in terms of our production abilities, in terms of the talent that's being developed here and the level of acting in different series, especially with GMMTV. The movies that are being produced, some of the more recent ones, it's just been great, and our CGI and our special effects have been getting better. The budgets are bigger. So, I think there's sort of this environment of optimism around the Thai film industry that if you make a project, it can go bigger than just in Thailand, and I think that's really good.

> "When I'm on set and I'm playing a character, I'm completely engrossed in that character. I feel who they are. I feel all of their emotions. And I'm just completely in the moment and that's just such an incredible feeling."

Another specific reason has been the rise of the BL series that have come out of Thailand and definitely out of GMMTV specifically, as well its popularity amongst [different] communities. It's something new, it's something interesting, something lovely and touching and different. I think Thailand has really embraced the LGBT community. And it's provided such a platform for everybody to love and enjoy around the world.

And then two people in particular who have really skyrocketed the popularity of not just boys love but also Thai entertainment, in general, are Bright and Win. Those guys are really pushing the boundaries of Thai entertainment and bringing us to a bigger stage, especially in [the field of] acting.

In addition to those Thai guys, there's also Lisa from Blackpink; she has been a reason for a lot more attention [being accorded to] Thailand from the music side. But I also think that the music kind of bleeds into entertainment in general because people around the world know that Lisa is Thai, so that brings more positive press and energy to Thailand in general. So, I want to give her credit as well.

What is your favorite acting genre? Is there any particular role you're excited about? More details about your planned projects, please...
So yeah, I sort of touched on this earlier, but my favorite acting genre is action sci-fi fantasy. A dream role of mine would be a superhero in one of the big studio films in Hollywood. Any particular role I'm excited to play? Well, I currently have some offers from different companies that I'm considering, but the role and the movie, the project that I'm excited for people to see is *Slyth: The Hunt Saga*. It's an action sci-fi fantasy film. It's just going to be a lot of fun. [I have spent] a lot of time doing workshops and action scenes for that film, and the directing is fantastic. The cinematography is really great. So, I'm really expecting a positive response for that film.

The other project that will come out this year is called *The Jungle* from GMMTV. It's great. It's a project with so many stars from GMMTV. So, the acting is going to be incredible in every scene. I think everybody's going to enjoy it. There are going to be no lows in any episode. I'm really excited for everybody to see it. It's about five guys who have their own kind of secret society, where they've all kind of had bad experiences with reality, with life. And so, they've found friendship and comfort in each other. They're sort of taking it out on the world, but this story is about their journey together. So, I'm really excited for people to see *The Jungle*.

How would you characterize yourself?
Wow. I would characterize myself as someone with a lot of energy, someone with a lot of passion. I love to help the people around me. I love to help people in general. I really like people. I'm a people person. I'm not necessarily a people pleaser, but I definitely enjoy being around people. I'm definitely somebody who likes to seize the moment. I'm not afraid to enjoy the present. Um, I think some might criticize me for being too focused on the future, for sort of forgetting the present moment. But I do know how to enjoy the present when the time is right. I love performing. I love acting. I love singing live in front of people, moments where I can give a lot of energy and get a lot of energy back. I think I enjoy those moments.

The entertainment industry is a rapidly evolving sector, and the times we live in are uncertain too. Does that help you identify what matters most in life?
Wow. I don't know if the entertainment industry, more than other industries, helps me identify what matters most in life. I think for me the most important thing in life is being happy and trying to help others. Be happy. But you can't make everybody

happy. Yeah, I mean, this is a little deep, it's getting more into philosophy and that sort of thing, but I wouldn't say the entertainment industry in particular has really changed my perspective on what's really important for me. I mean, as life experience in general, I want to help people, genuinely try and help a lot of people in whatever way possible, but yeah, I don't know if the entertainment industry has affected that. I think I intend to use the entertainment industry as a means to help people, but I wouldn't say that the industry has affected my view on what's important in life.

What do you like doing in your spare time? What's your holy grail?
In my spare time, I like solving Rubik's Cube 3x3. I really love it right now, and am trying to get my time to below 30 seconds. Right now, my average time is about a minute. So, I've been doing that and playing the guitar all the time. I've been doing these two things because I'm trying to get really good at them, good at the guitar so that I can, you know, be a rock star [laughs]. My holy grail? Probably time, I can never get enough of it. If I could have, like, a machine that just allowed me to go into a room away from time and space, it would make my life so much easier. Yeah, time is great, and sleep. Sleep is really good too. Those things are nice.

Do you know that you have a sizable following in India? Do you intend to travel to India?
I actually knew that I had some fans in India, based on some fan pages that have been created on Instagram, but I did not know that it was at this scale and I'm very thankful and very excited that *Rolling Stone India* has reached out to me for this interview. And in terms of plans to travel to, yes, I actually have some plans to travel to India. Probably on some work-related thing, but maybe not work related to acting. But yes, I do want to want to go and see the beautiful country.

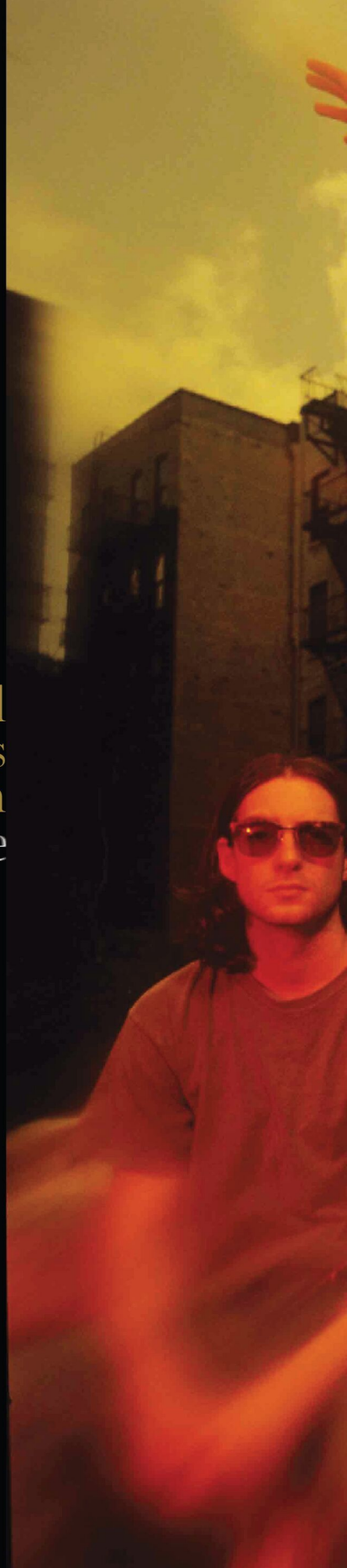
Any message to your fans here?
I want to thank everybody, all the fans who watched my shows from GMMTV over time. And thank you so much to *Rolling stone India*. I hope that people continue to enjoy the content, the movies, TV shows that I'll be acting in; the music that I will end up creating. I love you so much. You know, people enjoying our work is why artists, people like me, do what we do, so thank you for giving my life meaning. I appreciate you so much, and I hope all of you get everything that you want in life as well. I know that you can. ®

WHO DESTROYED LIVE?

How one of the most successful alt-rock groups of the Nineties was torn apart by an alleged con man

By Andy Greene

On March 4, 2020, guitarist Chad Taylor stood on a beach outside of the Hard Rock Hotel in the Dominican Republic. He fired up a Cuban cigar and stared out at the vast ocean. After years of bitter infighting and nasty legal battles, his band Live — best remembered for their Nineties hits "Lightning Crashes" and "I Alone" — was finally reunited and back on the road. Live had just wrapped up a successful co-headlining tour with Bush, there was talk of cutting a new album, and they were in the Caribbean to play a lucrative private gig. ¶ "Life doesn't really get any better than this," Taylor recalls thinking to himself. "I worked so hard to get this. Let's enjoy this. Tonight we're going to jump onstage, play for about 15 minutes, and we're going to get paid an obscene amount of money. This is perfect." ¶ When he looks back on it now, that moment on the beach was the last time he was truly happy. In the months that followed, nearly every single aspect of his life fell hopelessly



Live in 1995: Gracey, Kowalczyk, and Dahlheimer (from left) with Taylor (above)

apart. First, the pandemic shut down the global concert industry later that month, robbing Taylor of his only solid source of revenue. Then, a series of interpersonal calamities and alleged betrayals led to the breakdown of the band. As far as what exactly happened — the details change depending on who you talk to.

What we do know is this: In late 2019, a man named Bill Hynes, who'd been Taylor's partner in numerous business ventures throughout the prior decade, was arrested and charged with robbing, stalking, and brutally beating a young woman employed at their company. And in June 2022 — for reasons he's never publicly articulated but that are likely related at least in part to the turmoil that Hynes brought into the band's world — Live frontman Ed Kowalczyk fired Taylor via a terse Instagram post. "As of last evening, I own 55% of Live," the singer wrote. "Chad Taylor is fired. He will never stop the music again." Kowalczyk fired Live drummer Chad Gracey and bassist Patrick Dahlheimer, too — albeit in a less public fashion. Taylor remains on good terms with Dahlheimer, but the rest of the band now communicates mostly through lawyers. (Kowalczyk declined to comment for this article.)

This is hardly the first time in music history that a band has melted down due to personality conflicts, clashes over money, and legal battles. Wildly successful groups from the Beatles to the Police to Fugees have faced some combination of those issues, and most of them eventually got past it and repaired the damaged bonds. That's hard to imagine in this case. The onetime best friends in Live are now so bitterly divided on every imaginable topic — even the most basic facts of what transpired over the past few years — that speaking with them feels like asking Marjorie Taylor Greene and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to sit down for a friendly chat about the root causes of Jan. 6. (In fact, one of the former bandmates is a Trump supporter, while another calls himself a "bleeding-heart liberal.")

Let's start with Taylor. If you ask him, it was Hynes who destroyed the band. Taylor now describes Hynes as a gifted con artist, one who he claims stole more than $10 million from him and his bandmates, leaving him practically broke.

"I was a sucker," Taylor says. "I have people that depend on me, and I trusted a person that hurt us. I failed as a husband. I failed as a father. I failed the families of my bandmates. I have yet to forgive myself."

If you ask Gracey? "Everything that's happened is because of Chad Taylor," he tells me from Las Vegas, where he's in town to attend the AVN Adult Entertainment Awards. "He's a raving, pathological narcissist that's made Bill the boogeyman for everything that's happened in his life. I don't want to deal with him anymore at any level."

And Hynes? He agrees with Gracey. "Chad Taylor is a crazy drunk," Hynes tells me. "I regret ever meeting him."

Since cutting a deal with prosecutors in September 2022, in which he pleaded no contest to felony criminal trespass, felony theft by deception, two counts of felony forgery, misdemeanor stalking, and misdemeanor simple assault, Hynes has been held under house arrest at Live's former corporate headquarters in York, Pennsylvania. We're speaking over Zoom, with his lawyer looking on. "[Taylor] is a selfish individual," Hynes continues. "He only looks out for Chad Taylor ... and I'm probably one of the nicest, kindest people you'll ever meet."

Through all of this, Live has lived on — thanks to Kowalczyk, who has done his best to stay above the ugly squabbling that has consumed his former bandmates, and has focused, instead, on rebooting Live with three other musicians. The new iteration of the band hit the road in late October, although, so far, their gigs have largely been limited to casinos in tertiary markets like Mount Pleasant, Michigan, and Bensalem, Pennsylvania.

As Kowalczyk and his new bandmates gear up for a show at Florida's Busch Gardens Tampa Bay and a couple of summer festivals in the Netherlands, Taylor sits on the second floor of his guitar shop, Tone Tailors, in Lititz, Pennsylvania, where $4,000 Fenders line the walls and a road case with a fading Live sticker sits in a corner. A sign on the wall says "No Stairway to Heaven," referencing a classic moment in *Wayne's World*. Songs by the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac play in the background as Taylor's employees prepare to open up the shop for the day.

"I was a sucker," guitarist Chad Taylor says. "I have people that depend on me, and I trusted a person that hurt us. I failed as a husband. I failed as a father. I have yet to forgive myself."

"It has been very weird to see Ed go out and play shows with the new guys in the band," says Taylor, 52. "I had a panic attack recently: 'Am I late? Am I supposed to be in Buffalo, or wherever? Did I screw up?' Patrick and I joked that we were going to show up at the first show and stand outside with signs that said, 'Looking for work.'"

Taylor has been up since 4:30 a.m., poring over legal documents. There are dark bags under his eyes and specks of gray in his long beard and thinning brown hair. He speaks at a rapid clip as he goes through the saga of what happened to Live — a story he's still trying to wrap his head around.

"I'm just sitting here," Taylor says. "Trying to figure out how my band broke up over all this."

When it comes to Nineties alt-rock bands, Live falls somewhere between Matchbox 20 and Creed on the cool meter. Even at the peak of their popularity, when they were packing arenas, critics had virtually no use for them. "Song after song depended on the same groove — soft verse, LOUD CHORUS," read a typical concert review in a May 1995 issue of Rolling Stone. "But unlike, say, the Pixies' blare, Live's volume twiddling felt as predictable as a gag in a Jim Carrey movie."

Live were a major presence on MTV in the era between grunge and teen pop, but most young viewers of the time couldn't spit out the name "Ed Kowalczyk," let alone those of his three bandmates. They largely just knew the super-intense bald guy who delivered lines like "And to Christ a cross/And to me a chair" and "Her placenta falls to the floor" without a hint of irony.

That anonymity didn't stop Live from playing both Woodstock '94 and Woodstock '99, filming an episode of *MTV Unplugged*, appearing on the cover of Rolling Stone, selling millions of albums, and landing an incredible 17 hits on the *Billboard* Alternative Airplay chart over a period of 12 years. By the turn of the millennium, everyone in the band was a millionaire several times over.

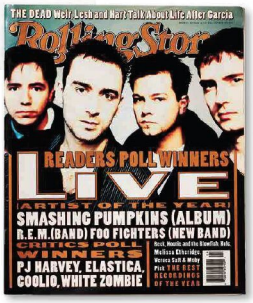
"Every friend and family member under the sun was suddenly starting a business or asking for a loan," says Taylor. "I've furnished several houses that weren't my own. I've bought several cars that weren't my own."

That lavish lifestyle, and the problems that come with it, would have been beyond imagination to the four members of Live back when they were teenagers growing up together in the small working-class town of York in the mid-Eighties. Taylor and Gracey bonded early over their shared love of alternative bands like the Cure, Joy Division, and Depeche Mode — especially since most of their classmates were into hair-metal groups like Quiet Riot and Ratt. "I spent every single weekend I possibly could at Chad's parents' house," Taylor says. "I'd sleep next to his bed in a trundle bed. We'd watch John Hughes movies like *Weird Science*. We were inseparable."

On this, if nothing else, Gracey is in agreement with his former bandmate. "We were best friends," the drummer says. "Sometimes today I'll hear an old U2 song and think, 'Oh, I used to listen to that with Chad.'"

In the eighth grade, they recruited their buddy Patrick Dahlheimer to play bass and booked themselves at a school talent show where they performed an instrumental medley of U2's "Like a Song" and Newcleus' "Jam on It." In the audience was a kid named Ed who used to chase Taylor around the playground and try to beat him up. "I asked for a hall pass to go to the bathroom, and I was walking down the hall, and I saw Ed," says Taylor. "I was like, 'Oh, my God, we're going to fight again.' My stomach turned inside out since I was so scared. And he walked up and he was like, 'Hey, man, I would love to play with your band.'"

The classic lineup of Live was complete before they entered high school. They called themselves Public Affection — the name Live wouldn't come until 1991 — and the next few years were marked by slow progress. In time they were opening for national bands like the Pixies, and original songs slowly began replacing covers in their set lists. They self-released their debut LP, *The Death of a Dictionary*, as teens in 1989, but they didn't really find their sound until two years later, in 1991, when they teamed up with Talking Heads guitarist Jerry



LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE Top: Kowalczyk, Dahlheimer, Gracey, and Taylor (from left) in the small town in Pennsylvania where it all started, 1988. Right: Live's Jan. 25, 1996, *Rolling Stone* cover.

Harrison to cut an album called *Mental Jewelry* for a subsidiary of MCA.

Leadoff single "Operation Spirit (The Tyranny of Tradition)," written by Kowalczyk and Taylor, wound up in MTV's Buzz Bin, suddenly exposing Live's music to fans all across America. When it first aired, the band was staying at the Phoenix Hotel in San Francisco — the same hotel as Nirvana, who had a show in town that night. "Nobody knew who Nirvana was at that point," Taylor says. "But they stood shoulder to shoulder with us after their gig, drinking beers, waiting for the video to come on. At midnight, they played 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' and 'Operation Spirit' back to back. It was the craziest thing."

Live's single eventually reached Number Nine on the Alternative Airplay chart, and they spent so much time touring behind it that their next album, *Throwing Copper,* didn't come out until weeks after Cobain's death in 1994. Leadoff singles "Selling the Drama" and "I Alone" exploded on rock radio, but they hit another gear with "Lightning Crashes." Written largely by Kowalczyk, the achingly sincere song is about a grim moment in a hospital where one woman dies at the moment another woman gives birth down the hall, completing the cycle of life and death.

"I remember entering the room and hearing him sing the word 'placenta,'" Taylor says. "I was like, 'What the hell is he singing about?' But back in middle school, when everyone else was at home trying to find their dad's *Playboy,* he was reading Eastern philosophy books. He was singing about mysticism and our spiritual journey."

Throwing Copper ultimately sold more than 8 million copies, becoming a mainstay of the post-grunge scene. But the critics still had little use for them. "We were never press darlings," Gracey says. "We had small-town, inexperienced management, and we deferred to them."

When it came time to craft a follow-up, the band dumped Harrison and leaned further into Kowalczyk's mysticism. They called their next album *Secret Samadhi* and released a turgid ballad called "Lakini's Juice" as the leadoff single — both references to philosophical concepts that were unfamiliar to many rock fans at the time. "All these people were like, 'You can't call the song 'Lakini.' You can't name the record *Samadhi,*'" Taylor recalls. "Then the worst thing that could possibly have happened to our egos happened: It came out and debuted at Number One. In my mind, as a pretty young guy, I was like, 'Well, the world can just fuck off, because you're wrong.'"

Behind the scenes, however, the band was falling apart. Taylor says Kowalczyk insisted on taking the lion's share of the publishing money since he was writing most of the songs, causing tension between him and Taylor that never truly went away. On Live's next album, in 1999, Taylor says, the singer went further, telling the band he would write the songs entirely by himself, using them as mere support musicians. "That ended my creativity in the band," says Taylor, still pained by the memory. "I felt like a married couple where someone says, 'I'm no longer going to have sex with you. But we'll stay married.' It was one of the saddest moments of my life."

Gracey feels that Kowalczyk was right to demand sole credit. "Ed has written every lyric and every melody for Live ever, and Chad would try to take credit," he says. "Chad might come up with a guitar idea that would become a song, but he didn't write the song."

He agrees, though, that the move caused major waves in the band. "Chad told me he hung himself outside a balcony and nearly jumped when we were on tour in New Zealand," Gracey says. "He's always been very dramatic about stuff, so I don't know if it even happened."

Taylor doesn't expressly deny the incident and concedes that he had a serious drinking problem in the early 2000s; he says he now has "a healthier relationship with alcohol" and a more stable outlook after undergoing treatment. And he's adamant that his mental-health challenges in that era were about more than songwriting disputes.

"I've been relatively open about my own struggles with self-medication and overcoming the challenges of being a creative person," Taylor says. "Like many of my peers, I feared I would commit suicide if I did not establish healthier practices for myself.... To characterize these complex issues as related to songwriting, or even my relationship with Ed, tells you how little Gracey understood about me and our creative process."

Tone Tailors is a small part of the 96-acre Rock Lititz campus, right on the edge of Amish Country. The overall campus is one of the nerve centers of the touring industry: Beyoncé, U2, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Usher, and countless others have used its arena-size rehearsal halls to prep major tours. There's an actual school in the complex devoted solely to pyrotechnics, a studio the size of two IMAX theaters, and a luxury hotel so visiting acts never need to leave the campus. Taylor walks me down the enormous halls and points out museum-ready rock artifacts like the cannon that gets wheeled out when AC/DC plays "For Those About to Rock (We Salute You)," and the giant model airplane that Roger Waters flew over the stadium crowds on his 2010 *Wall* tour.

The campus is a beehive of activity with credentialed employees scurrying about in every direction, but Taylor no longer has a need for any of the services offered here: His main priority is dealing with the lawsuits he now faces in the aftermath of Live's implosion, trying to figure out how he'll pay his mounting pile of bills, and worrying about what might happen once Hynes is freed from house arrest later this year.

We hop into his Jeep Cherokee and head into town. On the way, we talk about the first time Live collapsed. Taylor goes on about the rise of teen pop, the collapse of the industry due to Napster, and MTV's decision to abandon virtually every Nineties band once the ball dropped on the new millennium. On top of all that, they had the miserable luck of scheduling their sixth LP for release just seven days after 9/11. "What a horrible time period," he says. The group limped forward with new albums released in 2003 and 2006, but sales were anemic; Live were just as unpopular in the age of Fall Out Boy and Panic! At the Disco as they were in the days of Backstreet Boys and Korn. It came as no surprise when they called it quits in 2009. "We

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BOB BERG/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE, TOP: COURTESY OF ACTION FRONT UNLIMITED INC.

broke up over email," Taylor says. "Ed sent out a letter and was like, 'I think we ought to put this band on hiatus.' We all responded in about 30 seconds and went, 'Great idea.' There wasn't one of us that fought to keep it together."

Shortly after Live split up, with some of the former bandmates looking to get into the TV/movie business, their mutual attorney introduced them to Hynes, who was looking to get into TV, too.

The story from this point varies wildly depending on who is speaking. What's clear is that the accusations against Hynes are voluminous to the point that combing through all the police reports, criminal complaints, and courtroom filings — plus the articles published in the *York Daily Record*, which has been tirelessly pursuing this story for years — would take several hours. But a July 29,

DECLINE AND FALL Top: Hynes gives Gracey, Dahlheimer, and Taylor (from left) a tour of the Reading Outlet Center, which they bought for $1 million in 2011 with plans to renovate it as an apartment and retail complex. The building later collapsed. Below: Taylor and Kowalczyk onstage in 2019.

2019, Protection From Abuse document on file in York County's Court of Common Pleas stands out as particularly harrowing.

The document tells the story of a woman who worked for Hynes at United Fiber and Data, a fiber-optics company he founded with Taylor, Gracey, and Dahlheimer. She was in her early twenties when she met Hynes, who was two decades older, and she had no experience with telecom, but he hired her as an office assistant in 2014. "One night he invited me over," she told the court. "He attacked me, we had sex. It was not consensual ... the next thing I knew, I was in a relationship with my boss. Any fights we had personally, he would take it out on me through work ... basically, my employment was dictated by my personal relationship with Bill."

There was much that this woman — who has asked us not to reveal her name or other details about her life, citing ongoing fears for her own safety — still didn't know about Hynes at this point. She didn't know that he had a felony conviction for check forgery and at least one bankruptcy in his past, nor did she know about what she now describes as his titanic temper. "When I look at the level of his duplicitous actions," says Taylor, "it's nearly inconceivable for me to even imagine being that evil."

According to the victim, Hynes would go into a violent rage at the tiniest provocations. "If I ever tried to defend myself or speak up, he would fire me or threaten to fire me," she told the court. "He would shove me around in public. Once, in the lobby of the Encore in Las Vegas, he shoved me so hard I fell over. Later in the hotel room, he shoved me again. I fell back and hit my head on the hard marble floor. He then got on top of me and put his hand over my mouth and nose so I was not able to breathe."

During a 2018 work trip to Fiji, she alleges, he attacked her. "He lunged at me full force," she wrote. "He was on top of me, and his hands were around my neck. He is squeezing my neck and he said, 'Guess who's going to die tonight?'" She told the court that she eventually managed to break free and find shelter in another guest's room, where she called local authorities. They issued a warrant for his arrest, she says, but fearing he'd make bail and come and kill her, she declined to press charges. When she returned to America, she says, he continued to threaten her.

In 2019, after she went to police, Hynes was arrested on charges that included stalking her, putting tracking devices on her car, placing listening devices in her home, and even forging her signature on mortgage documents tied to her own house, causing her financial ruin.

Earlier this year, after significant delays in the legal system due to Covid, Hynes cut a deal with prosecutors. When I bring the matter up over Zoom, Hynes tenses up. "We're not going to talk about my ex-girlfriend," he says. "That was a complex and difficult relationship. I think both parties just want to move on with their lives, and be happy. That's what I wish for all of us."

That's about all he'll say about the crimes he was accused of. "I pled no contest to five charges," Hynes continues. "It was the quickest way forward, and not to drag anyone through a long and expensive lawsuit. I did not admit any guilt." His lawyer cuts me off when I press him on the specific charges leveled against him in court.

"My goal has always been to be free from my abuser and live a normal, healthy life," the victim tells Rolling Stone in a statement. "In the end, I felt the only way for me to achieve that was by getting a [Protection From Abuse Order]. I stand by everything that was in my petition." She adds: "I was also prepared to testify about my experience again, at the criminal trial. There was apparently over 600 pages of evidence that the police compiled. Unfortunately, after nearly three years of delays, a plea deal was agreed to without my consent."

The name "Bill Hynes" causes Chad Taylor to shudder today. But when they first met back in 2010, Taylor saw Hynes as a potential savior. Hynes not only offered them the chance to generate money away from Live, but he was also willing to fund Taylor's new band, the Gracious Few — an alt-rock supergroup of sorts featuring Dahlheimer, Candlebox singer Kevin Martin, and Candlebox guitarist Sean Hennesy. Passing himself off as a wealthy real estate investor (even though, according to public records, he'd just declared bankruptcy), Hynes promised to fund a recording session in Sausalito, California, with Live's former producer Jerry Harrison, housing for the bandmates' families, and a tour.

It was only when they arrived in Sausalito along with their gear, Taylor claims, that they learned every check Hynes wrote for the project had bounced. "We were stuck," Taylor says. "Talk about

FROM TOP: RYAN MCFADDEN/MEDIANEWS GROUP/READING EAGLE/GETTY IMAGES; YORK COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT; ANDY MARTIN JR./ZUMA WIRE/ALAMY

making an awkward call to your wife. I had to say to her, 'I need $10,000 right now to pay for the studio deposit. Oh, and I need another $15,000 for the housing.' And she's like, 'You mean out of our personal checking?'" (Hynes disputes nearly every aspect of this story. "No checks bounced," he says. "And they were responsible for paying all those people. I gave them $43,000, and they paid me back.")

Taylor says he pledged to never speak with Hynes again when it became clear the funds were never coming. Had he stuck with that pledge, the past decade of his life would have gone very differently. But a year or so later, he says, he got a call from Chad Gracey with Hynes on the line — begging for forgiveness, citing the stress of a recent divorce, and offering to make it right with Live. "He was pretty compelling," Taylor says. Soon, Taylor had agreed to "a few projects," including real estate opportunities and the fiber-optic company.

Today, Taylor alleges that Hynes was a talented grifter who was mainly interested in using Live as a means to bilk investors, hang out with celebrities, and bring young women into his orbit. Hynes counters, calmly and without hesitation, that he was always the man he claimed to be. "I'm a real estate investor," Hynes says. "I have such great credit that I could walk into Mercedes right now and walk out with a $300,000 car if I wanted to."

But some of Hynes' claims are very difficult to square with the historical record, including his assertion that he's only declared bankruptcy a single time. Public records show five bankruptcies for a William T. Hynes of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, between 2004 and 2012. When confronted with this, Hynes says he was the victim of multiple identity thefts, which he blames for the other bankruptcies in the system. "One of the people doing the identity thefts was another William T. Hynes," he says. "Somebody said it may or may not be a half brother, but I don't know if that's true or not because I didn't grow up with my father."

He also says he's never had a lien, a judgment, or a collection against him at any point in his life. Public records, however, show 11 liens that add up to $91,000 or more between 2002 and 2017 for William T. Hynes of Nazareth, Pennsylvania. "I don't have one lien on me whatsoever," he says indignantly. "I've never had a lien on me."

Hynes reentered Taylor's life at a desperate time. The Gracious Few dissolved after one album, and Taylor reformed Live in 2012 with Gracey and Dahlheimer — and Chris Shinn, son of billionaire Charlotte Hornets owner George Shinn, as their singer. An Ed Kowalczyk-free Live, however, was a difficult sell to most fans. They quickly found themselves on the Nineties nostalgia circuit with B-list acts like Everclear and Filter (and fighting Kowalczyk in court over the use of the band name).

"When we started, the original concept was 'Let's take the bones of this band that has a built-in audience, and let's slowly merge it into something unique,'" Shinn told Rolling Stone late last year. "But I came to find out it was all about making money for them."

Taylor, naturally, begs to differ. "That's so disingenuous," he says. "Respectfully, a guy that has a trust fund and has never worked a job in his life can't understand that we make our living as musicians. We have to tour."

Soon, though, the band members had to figure out other ways to supplement their income. Taylor tried producing movies, like the 2010 Ernest Borgnine-Cybill Shepherd film *Another Harvest Moon*; later, in 2011, he and the other members of Live (minus Kowalczyk) sold their publishing stakes in the band's catalog for $1.9 million. "I could have gotten twice as much in this market today," Taylor says. "But I went to the boys and said, 'We're going to all go broke. We aren't making enough money to live.'"

Right around when Taylor, Gracey, and Dahlheimer sold their publishing stakes, Hynes was back with a new set of schemes. "I think that's why he wanted back," Taylor says. "He wanted a shot at this fuckin' money." One of the more outrageous ideas that he says Hynes talked the three former bandmates into was investing $1 million with him into a building in nearby Reading, Pennsylvania. "I'm not shitting you," Taylor says. "The building fuckin' imploded and fell down."

"I have deep regrets that I wasn't more attuned to their relationship," Taylor says of Hynes' alleged violent abuse of their employee. "Those images will never leave my mind."

Undeterred from that disaster, they took some of the remaining money — plus a ton from deep-pocketed outside investors — and formed United Fiber and Data. The idea came from Hynes. "At first I was like, 'fiber optics?'" says Taylor. "'We barely know anything about real estate, let alone fiber.'" But Hynes had an idea to lay down a fiber-optic cable that ran directly from New York to Ashburn, Virginia, bypassing the big cities along the I-95 corridor where Verizon and others ran their cables. "I know this sounds weird, but I was like, 'OK, that sounds like a great idea,'" Taylor says. "Somebody said we went from throwing copper to laying cable."

Hynes served as the CEO, and Gracey, Taylor, and Dahlheimer all took positions at the company as well. But Taylor admits they didn't fully understand just how much capital they'd have to raise to get the operation off the ground or the challenges they were going to face, since laying down fiber-optic lines, or hanging them from poles, requires government approval in whatever jurisdiction they're going through. "I think there were 192 meetings in the state of New Jersey alone," he says. "This is not for the faint of heart."

Hynes stepped down as the CEO of United Fiber and Data in 2019 after he was charged with a litany of crimes related to his ex-girlfriend. The next year, he was sued by the company's new heads and accused of a "pattern of unlawful conduct" that included stealing millions from the company to "fund a lifestyle that he otherwise could not afford." Taylor was also named in the suit, accused of "breaching his fiduciary duties" and "self-dealing." (The lawsuit was settled out of court in 2022.) In 2021, the Pennsylvania State Police announced that they were investigating a reported theft of more than $3.82 million from United Fiber and Data. That matter is still pending, and Hynes has denied any financial misconduct at UFD.

Shinn was still fronting Live while they were working on these projects, though he had no direct involvement beyond an investment of $250,000 that he ultimately got back. "They opened a countless amount of businesses, but it was literally a Ponzi scheme," the singer alleges. "They'd take money from one to pay for the other ... and they were able to get meetings because they were the guys from Live. That's what got them in the door. They used that all the time."

From Shinn's vantage point, Hynes and Taylor were both complicit in the alleged financial misdeeds. "There was never anything Taylor didn't know about when it came to Live," he says. "He was the guy in the band that seemed to be in charge, and had all the numbers. I can't imagine in a million years he didn't know what was going on. That said, I don't think that Bill Hynes is innocent either. And I do think that Bill is the dirtier of the two. He belongs in jail."

Taylor, who says he is cooperating with a joint state police/FBI task force that is investigating United Fiber and Data, swears that he was unaware of any financial misdeeds at the time. "Anyone that might doubt my position should know that there were very sophisticated fiduciaries that he fooled as well," he says. "I'm talking about outside accountants, outside auditors, inside CFOs, inside legal counsel, inside CPAs. We were all manipulated. I'm a guitar player. Call me unsophisticated." (The FBI would neither confirm nor deny the existence of an investigation.)

Looking back now, Taylor wishes he'd paid more attention to the signals that things didn't seem right with Hynes — in particular, the relationship with his accuser, who Taylor knew from her time working in the office. "I have deep regrets that I wasn't more attuned to their relationship," he says. "I was touring in a rock band, and it wasn't like I was in the office every day." Later, he was shown visual evidence from the alleged attack in Fiji that shocked him: "I saw photographs of the victim's bruised face, her bloodied collarbone. Those images will never leave my mind. You can see thumb marks on her neck where she was choked. That's not the kind of human being that I'm going to forgive."

But like any good con artist, Taylor says, Hynes was very likable when he wanted to be. "If Bill wants you to like him, he's extremely bubbly, gregarious, and generous," says Taylor. "There's some element in him that feels trustworthy. The very worst feeling that I've had this entire time is where I have dreams where I'm still with Bill and I'm having fun."

Taylor and I arrive at Bulls Head Public House to grab lunch. We don't make it two steps into the place before Taylor bumps into an old friend from childhood at the bar. They embrace, and the friend

tells the bartender to put our entire order on his tab. Taylor isn't broke to the point where he can't afford his own bison burger, but he's grateful for the love. It's one reason he's stayed in Lancaster his whole life when most rock stars would have split for L.A. or New York after getting their first royalty check.

"I didn't want to raise my kid in Los Angeles," he says. "I wanted to raise my kid in an environment similar to where I grew up and that I understand. I'm as blue-collar as it gets. These are my people."

When we sit down to eat, he explains how Live managed to reassemble their broken pieces in 2016 and get back on the road with Kowalczyk for a lucrative series of reunion shows. The band used to split the tour revenue four ways evenly, but Kowalczyk was enticed to rejoin them by an offer to up his share to 40 percent; Taylor, meanwhile, increased his own share to 30 percent, with just 15 percent each going to Dahlheimer and Gracey. "I don't really know how to answer this," he says when I ask why he took twice as much as his two bandmates. "I think it just reflects the historical truth of the band."

That's not how Gracey saw it. "Without Patrick and I knowing, Chad Taylor unilaterally negotiated with Ed," the drummer complains when we speak. "Patrick and I were left with crumbs. That pissed me off from day one. It soiled the reunion."

This is just one of the sometimes-outlandish accusations Gracey makes against his former best friend. "There was an inappropriate relationship between my now ex-wife and Chad Taylor," the drummer claims. "He denies it, but I've confirmed it a few different ways." Bill Hynes, too, claims Gracey's ex-wife told him about this alleged affair. "That's just despicable," he says. "That's the bro code." (Taylor maintains that it is "categorically false" that he had sex with Gracey's ex-wife — and she says the same, writing in an email, "I did not sleep with Chad Taylor and I have *never* spoken to Bill Hynes about any of this.")

Or take the incident at the 2013 Grand Prix in Baltimore, in which Gracey and Hynes claim that Taylor punched Dahlheimer's wife, Jacqueline, in the face. "He laid her out," says Hynes. "He's an abusive person."

"That is absolutely, categorically untrue," replies Taylor. "It's just nonsense."

Jacqueline Dahlheimer backs him up. "Bill Hynes is flat-out lying. This man is a predator and a master manipulator. I was never 'knocked out' by anyone in a bar. I was jabbed in the arm almost 10 years ago during an argument with Chad Taylor. None of the people commenting were present. My husband and I took this incident seriously and held Chad accountable. This private conflict which has since been resolved is being sensationalized to manipulate."

(Patrick Dahlheimer declined to be interviewed for this article, but he did email us this statement: "We regret allowing Bill Hynes into our professional and private lives. Our family is working diligently to remove him and move on.")

In spite of the hurt feelings over the money split, and the drama surrounding the business ventures with Hynes, the reunited Live stayed on the road between 2017 and early 2020, when they were sidelined by the pandemic. When live music came back in late 2021, Kowalczyk disengaged himself from the three others. He started posting cryptic comments to fans online, suggesting Live were only a band "in name" and adding: "Interpret 'the reunion' however you'd like ... but I'm not in anyone's 'band.'"

"I hate social media," Taylor says. "But Patrick wrote to me: 'Ed is saying some weird stuff online.'"

And then in June 2022, in response to a fan question on Instagram, Kowalczyk took it a step further. "The three other original members are not speaking to each other — and I am stuck in the middle," he wrote, "and if I try to go solo, there is a good chance they will sue me again — so I have to do what's best for me and my family and try to stay out of litigation by not performing in public at all."

When I ask Taylor about Kowalczyk's sudden change in attitude, Taylor says at first he has no idea what prompted it. But then he thinks more about it. He does have a suspicion. "My theory is that Chad Gracey and Bill Hynes influenced him," he says. "I think they picked the scabs off the old wounds, specifically the [band name] lawsuit."

Gracey, again, has his own take. "I talked to Ed," he says. "He said, 'If you guys are going to be adversarial, I don't want you onstage, and I just don't want to deal with the drama.' And Ed, to his credit, doesn't have anything to do with this. He just wants to go play with Live, which he should be able to."

Even though Taylor claims Kowalczyk has no legal means to fire him from Live, the guitarist also can't force Kowalczyk to play shows with him. That's why they worked out the legal arrangement that put Live back on the road with replacement musicians, and a portion of the proceeds going to Kowalczyk's former bandmates. "Ed had management and our entertainment lawyer reach out," Taylor says. "And by this point I just figured, 'Well, clearly, at least at this moment, these are not my people, so we got to figure out a way to make it work.' So that's what we did. We worked out a deal."

Taylor and I head out of the restaurant and toward downtown Lancaster. This is where Live moved in the early days of the band, and there are memories on nearly every corner. Taylor points out the former location of a club where they opened up for the Pixies in 1990, and the building where they lived a few years later when they wrote *Throwing Copper*. "I feel like I used to know every person in Lancaster," he sighs. "The town has grown so much."

We park and walk into Redeux Vintage, an upscale vintage clothing store where a Billy Joel T-shirt from the *Storm Front* tour will set you back $75. In the early Nineties, this was Live's rehearsal space. He points to a corner. "I wrote 'Lightning Crashes' right here," he says. "And I wrote 'Dam at Otter Creek' right over there. It all happened right in this space."

But this was a lifetime ago, back when the four working-class kids from York had the same dream and assumed they'd always be best friends. As the sun starts to set over the town, there's so much that's still unsettled. Hynes has yet to be charged for any of the alleged financial misdeeds related to UFD that the task force is apparently investigating, but Taylor and his legal team hope that's coming any day. Taylor hopes this happens before Hynes is released from house arrest, because he's terrified of what might happen if his former associate is back on the street.

Taylor's last communication with Kowalczyk came in June 2022, when he emailed the singer and his team to refute an allegation that Taylor was planning to bring a new lawsuit against him.

"I want to be brutally clear because I do believe something is being manipulated or misinterpreted," Taylor wrote. "Neither Patrick or I have *ever* threatened a lawsuit against Ed. Hand to God, strike me dead ... Who is saying this? And why? Who would benefit if Live breaks apart? I want nothing more than to get on stage with *our* band. Period."

He went on to tell the singer about his concerns regarding UFD's finances. "Chad Gracey appears to continue to work with Bill Hynes, despite being warned that he could be placing himself in criminal jeopardy," Taylor wrote. "Ed, more importantly, someone is playing heavily with your past emotions. That is not me, and it is not Patrick."

The response from Kowalczyk chilled him: "Bill Hynes is innocent until proven guilty.... Direct any communications for me to [my lawyer] from this point forward."

Taylor says that Gracey — who's planning to start a new business venture with Hynes whose details he won't reveal — has fallen down a rabbit hole of far-right politics and conspiracy theories, including QAnon. Gracey doesn't entirely deny this. "I voted for Donald Trump in 2020," Gracey says. "And I had my conspiracy theories about Covid and vaccines and stuff like that, sure. I would look at the [Q] stuff, and I never took it seriously. But I look at all kinds of stuff. It's kind of funny that he's bringing this up."

At the moment, Gracey is suing Taylor for nearly $500,000 that he claims to be owed via a promissory note. (Taylor says it wasn't a "valid promissory note.") It's one of three lawsuits Taylor is currently facing; he claims all of them are being "coordinated" by Hynes. "The legal fees are extraordinary," Taylor says. "They're trying to inflict maximum damage."

As for Hynes' victim, she wants to put this ugly chapter of her life behind her forever, though she hopes that other women going through similar experiences can learn from her story. "My hope is that anyone in the same position that reads this remembers one thing: There is still hope, do not give up," she says. "There is light and freedom and happiness at the end of this dark and terrifying tunnel. There are so many women who don't survive, and you only hear their story after it's too late. I know I am very lucky to be alive, but I should have spoken out and involved law enforcement sooner. I feared the retaliation that would come from telling the truth. Deciding to leave will always be an extremely difficult path to take, and it's unimaginably scary to think about standing up to your abuser, but that decision is the single most important decision that you will ever make in your life."

Taylor hopes to return to music soon. He's beginning to imagine a solo album and tour, possibly with Dahlheimer, where he can play old and new songs, and tell some of the stories he's built up over a life in rock. He hasn't played a single concert since that private gig in the Dominican Republic back in early 2020, and he misses performing desperately.

Gracey holds out hope that Kowalczyk will invite him back into Live sometime later this year. In his mind, a reunion of the four original members is impossible. "I don't ever want to play with Chad Taylor again," he says. "The best way to deal with a narcissist is to not deal with him, so I don't want to. Every time he opens his mouth, he's either manipulating you, trying to control you, or bully you."

Taylor, despite everything, hopes the band someday finds a way to come together. "My family will kill me for saying this," he says. "But I'd do a show with all the boys tomorrow. I love them — even Gracey and all his screwed-up shit. I love them, and I love the music we made."

Helen Mirren

Hollywood's grande dame on heroes, royals, and the joys of kicking ass

You play an ancient goddess in the *Shazam* sequel. Given your choice of mythological deities to embody, which would you become?
Maybe Venus? One of the powerful ones. But even back then, the female deities didn't have it quite as good as the male gods, you know. Not even a goddess could catch a break.

'Shazam! Fury of the Gods' is out March 17. '1923' airs on Paramount+.

You've played both Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Elizabeth II. What did those roles teach you about power?
That delegation is important. Elizabeth I was the opposite of Trump. She listened to opinions different from her own to get a complete picture of things, and that's why she's gone down in history as one of the greatest leaders of all time. Well, in *British* history. British people tend to think their history is the only history that matters.

Did playing Queen Elizabeth II change your idea about who she was?
I grew up in a very anti-monarchist household, so that was always my attitude. But I did actually write her a letter: "We're doing this film. It's about a very painful period in your life, and I'm playing you...." It was after I'd done a lot of research and kind of fallen in love with her. I got a formal letter back saying [*pinched nasal voice*], "The queen has read your letter with great interest. Thank you so much." [*Laughs.*]

Who are your heroes?
I encounter heroes in the newspapers, when I read stories of people who do extraordinary or brave or authentic and energetic things. Like Usain Bolt [*laughs*]. You know, impress me and excite me and make me think life's worth living.

You've said that you hate Westerns, but you're doing *Yellowstone* creator Taylor Sheridan's show *1923*, which is a Western.
I don't like old-fashioned Westerns where women were literally either teachers or madams at a brothel, and there was nothing in between. [But *1923*] is American history. I mean, I see it as ... I'm going to sound incredibly pretentious here....

Go for it.
In a way, it's America's *War and Peace*, that huge arc of history told through a family's perspective. These people are cruel, greedy, arrogant, self-interested — and they're the heroes! You have no idea [of the plot] until the next script arrives, and that's the first time I've ever been in that situation. It's a lot more like real life. I know the plumber is coming by around 10 a.m. tomorrow, but apart from that, I have no idea what's going to happen to me.

You do a nice mix of prestigious dramatic roles and Helen Mirren-kicks-ass roles.
Yes! For which I say: God bless America. They've been great about giving me a lot of Helen Mirren-kicks-ass roles. I always try to mix it up. That's the fun of doing this.

Did you find that people began treating you differently after you became a Dame Commander of the British Order in 2003?
No one except for British Airways. Now they say, "Good morning, Dame Helen Mirren!" That is quite lovely.

What's the best and worst part of success?
The best part is economic independence. I grew up in a family that, economically, was always on the edge. So that is fantastic. The worst? The constant fear that utter failure is right around the corner. The pendulum always swings back. It's just a question of when, not if.

What's your biggest vice?
Well, what you may consider a vice I might consider a virtue, so ... my mantra is "Do everything. But don't do too much of anything."

Do you have any regrets?
So many it's ridiculous. My biggest is that I never learned to deal with my lifelong procrastination. I wish I'd done that sooner in my life.

What are the most important rules you live by?
I have a tiny tattoo on my hand, which are these interlocking V's. It has a South American Indian meaning that translates to a more sophisticated version of "Love thy neighbor." I'm so glad I got it, especially when I have to glance down at it to remind myself about what it means when someone is being so annoying. DAVID FEAR

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